

Chapter 1 The New Husband

By Rorschach's Blot

"Tell me about Harry Potter," Luna demanded.

"He's a very brave and intelligent young boy," Luna's mother replied.
"And he's the one that saved us all from the dark lord."

"Do you think he'd make a good husband mummy?" Luna asked innocently. In the short time that she had been alive, Luna had focused on her parent's relationship and had come to the conclusion that she wanted one of her own.

"Of course he would dear," Luna's mother assured her daughter.
"And maybe he'll become your husband when you get older. I have to go to work now, bye hun."

"Bye mummy," Luna replied automatically. The young girl watched her mother leave and contemplated the words that she'd just been told. "When I'm older? Bugger that, I'm going to go get Harry right now so we can live happily ever after."

Her course set, Luna immediately set to work in accomplishing her goals. A quick visit to her parent's room located a broom and an old invisibility cloak (Her father said it was needed to hunt Mimbari) and she was almost ready to go get her soon to be husband. There was only one problem, she didn't know where Harry Potter was.

"Bugger," Luna cursed. It annoyed her mother and would get her father into trouble so she did it every chance she got. A few more minutes of thought gave her the solution for her dilemma and Luna went off in search of her father.

"Hello rutabaga," Luna's called her his pet name for . . . her. "What can I do for you?"

"I need to find something father," Luna replied quietly. "Can I borrow your multi purpose detector?"

"Ok carrot." The man shrugged, it wasn't like she could get into any trouble with it.

"Thank you father," Luna said quietly. Inside she was jumping for joy, she'd soon have her husband.

Luna went back to her room and donned the invisibility cloak and mounted her broom . . .and nothing happened. Growling in exasperation, the little girl went off in search of her father again.

"Hello again cabbage," Luna's father said when he noticed his daughter. "Do you want me to make you some lunch?"

"No father." Luna shook her head, how was she going to do this without him being suspicious? "I just wanted to know how a broom worked."

"Why?"

"It's not so that I can use it to fly out to find Harry Potter," Luna replied immediately.

"Well . . . as long as you're not going to go out and find Harry Potter," Luna's father agreed. "Hold your hand above it and say 'up' in a firm voice."

"Thank you father." Luna gave the man a peck on the cheek and returned to her room.

Luna was ecstatic, the broom worked and she was on her way to formalize her marriage. It took nearly two hours of flying before Luna managed to find Harry Potter and when she did, she was shocked at his condition.

"Hello," Luna greeted the young boy. "Is your name Harry Potter?"

"Yes," the boy replied nervously.

"Do you want to go home with me and be my husband?"

"Away from here?" Harry perked up.

"Yup," Luna agreed.

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"Luna," her father looked down at the two children. "Who's this boy."

"He's my new husband daddy," Luna smiled up at her father.

"Does your mother know about this?" Luna's father scratched his chin, he was sure that his daughter's marriage was something he'd remember. . . on the other hand, he had probably been drinking to celebrate so

"No daddy," Luna shook her head. "She hasn't gotten home yet."

"I'll tell her then," Luna's father offered. It was the responsible thing to do after all.

"Ok," Luna gave another cute smile and then went back to playing with her new friend.

"Wait a minute." Luna's father froze in his tracks, "what are you trying to pull here Luna?"

"Um . . ."

"You haven't eaten lunch," Luna's father finished. "If you think that I'm going to allow you to skip meals then you have another thing coming."

"Ok father," Luna agreed. "Can you make my husband some food too?"

"Of course my little crabapple."

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"Dear?" Luna's mother had returned home to find her daughter playing with a strange boy and had approached her husband to get an explanation. "Who is that strange boy playing with our daughter?"

"Hmmm?" Luna's father blinked, "oh that's her new husband. I think I drank too much at the wedding and forgot the wedding, I promised Luna that I'd tell you about it."

"I see." It was times like this that she wondered why she married him. "When are his parents coming over to get him?"

"Parents?" Luna's father scratched his chin, "I think Luna said that he was going to live with us. I don't recall anything about any parents."

"Ok." Luna's mother ground her teeth, "who dropped him off?"

"Dropped him off?" Luna's father thought hard for a minute, "no one. He just appeared."

"So what you're telling me is that some strange boy wandered into the house?"

"I'm not saying that at all," Luna's father disagreed. "Luna brought him."

"Luna . . . Honey, could you come in here for a minute." Luna's mother called out, she was going to get to the bottom of things. Luckily her daughter had inherited some common sense . . . from her side of the family.

"What is it mummy?" Luna asked innocently.

"Where did that boy come from?"

"I brought him here mummy," Luna replied quickly.

Now we were getting somewhere, "where did you find him?"

"In a garden doing yard work," Luna said.

"What's his name?" Luna's mother grinned.

"We haven't decided yet mummy," Luna said to her mother's displeasure.

"What do you mean honey?" But the woman wasn't going to let it show.

"You said that after you get married then you have to decide what last name to keep, remember mummy." Luna reminded her mother. "He's my husband now mummy so we have to decide our new name."

"Ok . . . ok . . . what was his old name darling?"

"Harry Potter mummy," Luna answered. "You said that he'd make a good husband."

"Why don't you step out of the room while have a talk with your father about how you were able to go out and track down Harry Potter and then bring him back here when your father was supposed to be watching you . . . ok hun?"

"Ok mummy," Luna agreed.

Chapter 2 The Wedding

Harry could hardly believe the amount of food that he was given to eat. And no body was yelling at him, or insulting him, or forcing him to set the table, or clean the dishes, and sweep the floor, and all those other jobs he had to do every night after the Dursleys ate.

Of course, he did some of them, but then the most amazing thing happened -- his new friend's mother said, "Thank you." And she smiled at him! He could barely believe it! The teachers at school used to smile at him, but now they only seemed sad when they watched him.

Now he was sitting on the couch with his new friend, and they were reading together. It was a book unlike any he had ever seen. The pictures moved! They sat next to each other and Luna kept smiling at him, and he found himself smiling back.

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Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster, etc, frowned when he got back to his office after a long, boring day at the Ministry. One of the little metallic devices that was always spinning on a shelf had stopped spinning. Harry Potter was no longer where he was supposed to be. He waved his wand at it, and found that Harry had been missing since the morning.

This was highly unusual. He could count on the thumbs on one hand the number of times Harry had been away from his home this summer. If he were with the Dursleys, but not at home, then the device would spin a different way. So something strange was going on. He'd have to investigate.

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The next day Selene Lovegood left her job in the Department of Mysteries and spent her lunch hour in the Department of Records. She learned several things, just not what she wanted to know. She found out that Harry Potter's records were sealed. Not only were they sealed, but only the Minister of Magic and the head of the

Wizengamot could get access. She also found out that a number of people who had been accused of being Death Eaters had also tried to gain access to the file over the years. She did not learn where Harry lived before her daughter rescued him.

Rescued. She had come to that conclusion. He had gotten up early and started making breakfast, but was unfamiliar with the layout of the kitchen, so had not progressed very far before Selene had interrupted him. He was extremely frightened when she found him. She found that he expected to be punished for not having the breakfast ready. It took some time to convince him that she wouldn't punish him.

Harry had been given one of her husband Larry's T-shirts to wear as a night shirt. He was a small boy, as small as Luna, even though he was about a year older. He could be called wiry, but she thought he was just thin. But it was the lines of scars across his legs that drew her attention right away. She examined them -- none were very recent, but there were some black and blue marks on his upper thighs. She gently lifted the night shirt, and tried to sooth the boy who was tensing up. He was expecting a beating. There were more strap scars on his back.

She quickly checked his buttocks under the underwear, and saw they were black and blue. She put his clothes back in order, and gave him a hug, telling him that she would never hit him. He held himself stiffly in the hug, like he didn't know what was going on.

She made him breakfast, and talked to him while they ate. She found out about his home life. Even accepting that he was exaggerating, she realized that he was being abused. The scars on the backs of his legs and the bruises were not exaggerations.

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Dumbledore was getting very worried. All he could get out of the Dursleys was that Harry had run away, and what an awful, ungrateful, lazy child he was. It was hard to get even that out of them, their manaphobia made them extremely difficult to work with. He had tried to enlist the aid of a few teachers to search the area, but had run into

problems. Severus couldn't stop insulting the child he had never met, and Minerva couldn't stop telling him what a mistake it was to leave Harry with the Dursleys. But Dumbledore had been in the house - it was picture perfect. The Dursleys, despite their problem with magic, loved their child. Surely, such a meticulous environment and loving family couldn't be bad!

It was now going on 24 hours and he still had no idea where to look for the boy. He was going to have to do something that might break the Secrecy Act. He was going to send Harry an owl. Well, he hadn't quite reached that point, but if something else didn't come to mind, he would.

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Selene headed off to work after a serious talk with her husband. The broom was going to be locked up. The children were going to be supervised. The invisibility cloak was put on the shelf at the top of the closet, out of reach of little hands. She made sure the Firewhiskey was locked up, and she changed the runes on the lock just to make sure. He'd never guess The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy snorkack. She spoke with the children - no leaving the property. No farther than the hedge at the front of the house, nor beyond the stream that flowed through the back yard. She informed her husband of the first rule of parenting - if they're quiet, they're getting into trouble. Really, you'd think he was never a kid. Or maybe he just never grew up.

She went to work then, still unsure what to do about the new addition to their household. No matter what Luna thought, they could not get married. She would have to sit them down tonight and explain things. Theoretically, Larry could sit them down and explain it, but the chances of that actually happening were as small as getting rid of the bollywoggle infestation in the house. She automatically untangled a knot from her hair at the thought.

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Minerva McGonagall had never been so angry in her life. In some small corner of her soul she was secretly satisfied that she was right.

But that satisfaction was totally overwhelmed by the fact that the headmaster's mistake had hurt a child. She walked to Hagrid's hut and invited him with her. She was candid with the large man - they were going to investigate Harry Potter's home life. They walked into the woods near his hut far enough to get beyond the wards, and Apparated to Privet Drive. Walking up to number four she thought she could feel the absence of the boy who was supposed to be there. They knocked on the door, and it was answered by the woman that Minerva had spied upon six years ago. The woman took one look at Hagrid and let out a shriek, and tried to slam the door. Hagrid put out a hand and stopped its motion. With no effort he pushed the door open.

"Mrs. Dursley. I am Professor McGonagall. I am investigating the disappearance of Harry Potter. You will let us in, or the Aurors will arrest you and we will come in anyway."

Petunia Dursley may not have liked having a sister in the Magical world, but she learned as much as she could about it. Perhaps it was jealousy; or perhaps it was a Slytherin attitude towards knowing your enemy. But she knew what Aurors were, and she didn't want them arresting any of her family. She knew the Wizarding World's attitude towards Muggles.

Despite her protests that she didn't know anything, Professor McGonagall learned a number of unpleasant facts. Harry was wearing his cousin's old clothes since he had none of his own. She couldn't get a good description of him, except that he wasn't as "big boned", and "well filled out" as Dudley. There were no pictures of him, and Mrs. Dursley wasn't sure what he had been wearing. She didn't know when he disappeared. It was a nice day, so after breakfast his job was to weed the lawn and garden. He didn't come in for lunch because Mrs. Dursley liked not having him in the house, and she might have "forgotten" to feed it to him. If it bothered him he could speak up and complain, couldn't he? They didn't discover that he was gone until dinner when he should have been doing the dishes, even if he didn't want to eat.

It was only after Minerva told Hagrid to find Harry's room that Petunia showed them the cupboard under the stairs where he lived. Hagrid

ripped the door off its hinges and crumbled it to kindling when he realized that there was no latch on the inside - the person in there was locked in every time the door was closed.

They found out that Harry had no friends. They found out that Dudley's friends made sure of that. No one had checked up on Harry since his first teacher had tried, and Vernon got her fired for harassing the family. Minerva and Hagrid searched the park and the school, but found nothing. They Apparated back to Hogwarts for a late lunch, though neither had much appetite.

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Harry and Luna had another fun day. They noticed Luna's Dad around a lot more than he had been the day before. They played house, and Harry cleaned. They played outside, and Harry pulled weeds. They ate lunch, and Harry ate a lot. They read together again, and Luna liked the way he read. He was still fascinated by the moving picture books, but Luna insisted that she had outgrown those years ago, and now that she was a big girl, she read big books.

They read Encyclopedia Brown, even though the book wasn't big, it did have more words (and the pictures didn't move). Luna, who had read it before, let Harry solve the mysteries. He explained some things that had confused her, like bicycles and televisions. Luna was impressed. Her mother was right, Harry was smart. Luna, in turn, explained wands and magic. She was sure he was magic, because he had defeated the Dark Lord and saved everyone. Harry didn't believe it. How could he have done something like that without knowing it? And he had no wand, so how could he be magic. Luna wasn't sure, so they went outside and ran around. Harry had fun.

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Dumbledore couldn't fit what he had heard from his deputy Headmistress with what he had seen. There was no way that the Dursleys could have done to Harry what she said they did. Once he came to that conclusion, there was nothing more to be said. Obviously, Minerva had misunderstood. Which still left him with the question, how to find Harry.

He looked suspiciously at a device he really didn't put much faith in. It was an antique diagnostic artifact, given to him nearly seventy years ago. It took so long to attune to a patient that it really had no practical application in the medical field. It was just sitting there six years ago, and he was bored, so he took an afternoon and attuned it to Harry. It usually just slowly puffed grey smoke. Sometimes it puffed black, and a few times it puffed red. The directions had been lost decades ago. But now it puffed white smoke. And sometimes it puffed it very fast. Now he wished he had the instructions. He couldn't remember if it could tell where someone was. But it was producing a lot more smoke than it used to. He took it off the shelf, and stuck it in a lower drawer of his desk. He would have to make a concerted search for the instructions. But in the meantime, he found something in the drawer that he hadn't thought about in years. Yes, this was a project that he had put away when he kept running into theoretical brick walls. Now that he had it, he'd have to schedule some time to do more research. He put the rubber chicken on the top of a pile of papers on his desk, and remembered that he had to find Harry Potter.

What to do? What to do? He hadn't been this confused since Throckmorton Gildersleve had bred those clothes-eating pixies in '41. That had been a dinner in the Great Hall to remember! He shook his head. He had to concentrate on the current problem. If this continued much longer, he'd have to inform the Ministry, and that could be disastrous. But he guessed that they would find the boy.

Wait a minute -- they would use Aurors. That was it. He had a friend who was a retired Auror! He got on his knees -- he was getting to old for this sort of thing -- threw some floo powder into the fire, and called, "Alastor Moody!"

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Larry Lovegood watched the children running through the backyard. He wondered about his daughter's husband. Despite having been married for almost ten years, he still mostly had a bachelor's view of cleaning. Harry, though, always cleaned up after himself. After lunch he had started washing the dishes by hand. Usually, Larry just left them for his wife to cast some cleaning charms on them. Luna had

joined her husband, and they seemed to have fun doing it. Larry scratched his head over that one.

When they finished a game Harry would put all the toys away. When they finished reading -- well that wasn't quite unusual, as his wife and Luna also always put books away. He tried several times to figure out what rune-key his wife had set for the liquor cabinet, but gave up. Dang it! An editor was supposed to be hard drinking and hard smoking! She wouldn't allow him to smoke, either. That part was alright. He never liked it the few times he had tried. At least now he had an excuse for not smoking. The kids were making noise, so he went back to his office and worked on his editing job.

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Selene took a long lunch to go shopping. For some reason many witches and wizards didn't seem to have an ounce (milliliter, she reminded herself) of common sense. Her husband, for example, no matter how much she coached him, he just couldn't go among the Muggles without sticking out like a sore thumb. It seemed he gravitated towards plaids and stripes like a Nargle to mistletoe. She herself fit in just fine, and had no problem moving among them. She was dressed in a simple orange and blue striped skirt, with a bright green top.

She bought Harry -- well, everything. He had come with one set of clothes, and those didn't fit him. She bought him a trunk to use and had the shopkeeper help her load all the clothes into it. They were going on a vacation in a week, and he would need it.

They didn't have a lot of money, but she contemplated getting a training broom for the kids. Then she decided against it. Both of them had been on a real broom two days ago. There was no question that her daughter knew how to fly one safely. She would just have to teach Harry basic broom safety. She didn't want him just picking it up off the streets! Who knew what misinformation he would learn.

After the shopping trip, she spent some time at the Unspeakable's potion lab. She brewed up some basic healing potion, and some bruise salve, signing off the ingredients for her personal use.

Algie Croaker walked through the lab, and noticed what she was doing. "That's quite a batch of salve. Problem?"

She shook her head. "Kids! You won't believe what my daughter got up to yesterday!"

"Try me. She can't be any worse than my great-grand nephew. He cultivated a Venus Man Trap in his window box for most of last summer before we caught it. He kept snipping off the jaw-leaves before they could grow." They both laughed at that.

Selene thought for a moment then said, "Yesterday she decided to go get a husband. Took the broom out and well, sometimes I just don't think my husband understands what child rearing is all about, as he didn't notice a thing going on."

"But she's alright?" Selene nodded. Croaker laughed. "Good thing she didn't catch one. You might need that for him if he put up a fight. Let's see, you're in Ottery-St. Catchpole, right? Hmmm, Cedric Diggory is probably too old for her. There's the youngest Weasley boy. He's only, what, a year or two older?"

"No, she wasn't going after either of them."

"How about, Neville?" Croaker joked.

"No, it seems Luna has her own ideas. As long as they don't get her killed. . . . How is Neville, by the way? No lasting, uh, effects?" She was one of the few people who knew about his potentially life-threatening way he proved that Neville wasn't a squib.

"Uh, no. No lasting effects. We're all just glad that Alice and Franks' only child isn't a squib. That would have probably killed Augusta."

"Hmmm, Algie. Would you mind if I came over to see you and your wife after work? I'd like to bring Luna and her cousin, because I'd really like to talk to Rosamond about him."

"Luna has a cousin? You've never said anything about him before. I didn't think you or Larry had any siblings."

"Well, it's just short hand. I'm not entirely sure of his relationship with Larry. He's just here from Australia. And he's an orphan. I'd like to have Rosamond check him out, medically, if that's alright."

"You don't want to go to your regular healer?"

"I'll explain it all tonight, if you don't mind."

"Alright, Selene. This seems a little mysterious, but what the hell, eh? We're the Department of Mysteries, right?"

"Exactly. Thank you. I'll see you around seven?"

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Harry and Luna were playing Aurors and Robbers in the back yard when Harry suddenly stopped.

"Stupify! I got you!" yelled Luna. She looked at him for a moment. "Hey, you're supposed to fall down."

Harry just stood there with his head tilted, seeming to listen. Then he squatted down, ignoring Luna. She came up to him, and looked over his shoulder. There was a green grass snake staring at him. She heard Harry hiss, and the snake seemed to nod its head in agreement.

"Whatcha doing, Harry?"

"I'm talking to this snake. She just ate a beetle and will go back to her den now."

"Do you often talk with snakes?"

"This is the first time. I heard her muttering to the beetle to stop wiggling so much while she ate it."

"Hello, Miss Snake," Luna said, amicably.

Harry hissed. He turned to Luna. "She can't understand you. And she can't understand me when I talk to you. But she understands me when I talk to her. I wonder why that is?"

"That's easy, silly. Magic!"

"Oh, that makes sense. Bye, bye, Miss Snake," and Harry repeated the good bye in parseltongue. He picked up the stick that he was using as a wand, and said, "Now it's your turn to be the Robber."

"I'm going to steal a dragon from Gringotts Bank."

"Do they keep dragons in banks?"

"Where else would you keep one? It would burn down your house if you kept it at home."

Harry nodded, covered his eyes, and started counting, while Luna ran away.

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Selene stepped out of the fireplace carrying a suitcase.

"Going on a trip, dear?" her husband asked.

"I was thinking about leaving you, but then I thought it would be less trouble just to kick you out. Then I thought, since you're taking us on a vacation next week, I'll just get Harry some luggage. It's also filled with clothes for him."

"That's nice dear."

"Larry, we're going to have to set up a room for Harry to sleep in. He can't keep sleeping in Luna's room."

"Hmmm, if we expand the mud room, we can convert that to an office for me. Then I can move my stuff out of the upstairs room, and Harry could have that. I'll be able to work, and watch the kids in the back yard while I'm doing it, if we put the desk under the window."

Selene had to admit that it was a good plan. But they were going to be busy tonight, and they might not get to it tomorrow, and after that she couldn't see any time before they left on their trip.

"I was also thinking, why don't we keep Harry."

"I assumed he was staying. After all, he is Luna's husband."

Selene rolled her eyes. He was a sweet man, and quite capable in many ways, but he just hadn't been all there since that last spell that ended his career as an Auror. She just smiled indulgently, and said, "Dear, he's not really Luna's husband. They're too young to get married. But I was thinking that if we change his name to Lovegood, and claim he's a distant relative of yours, we can avoid most questions."

"Whatever you say dear. They do get along quite well."

"Yes, I had noticed that too. And speak of the little monsters, where are they?"

"I haven't seen any little monsters. Are there some around? What kind? Should we lock up the kids? I sent them to wash up. I had just called them in."

"No, that's fine. I just want to talk to them about, uh, some things. Also, I'll be taking them to the Croaker's after dinner for a little visit."

"That's nice, dear. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get the article on illegal Centaur races done or the next issue will be too short."

Selene sat Harry and Luna down in the living room. "Did you decide on a name yet?"

"Well, Luna Lovegood sounds so good with the two elles, while Luna Potter doesn't have anything special about it. Harry Potter doesn't either, and Harry Lovegood isn't any better or worse. Now if we could change the first name too, I could become Patti Potter, or Harry could become Lowel Lovegood, but you never said anything about changing the first names."

"I don't like Lowel," Harry put in his two knuts worth.

"I never said anything about changing first names because first names don't change. However, Harry, I would appreciate it if you would take the name Lovegood, at least for awhile. We'll know your real name, and you'll know your real name, but I don't want anyone else to know it. Will you do that for me?"

"Alright. But if I want my own name back, I can have it?"

"Yes dear. Now let's eat. We're going to visit some friends of mine after dinner."

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It was not a good evening for the Dursleys. Mrs. Dursley had done her best cleaning up the pieces of the broken door. The wood splinters had punctured the Hoover's bag and pumped dust into the house. She hadn't even gotten to cleaning that before Vernon came home, and she had to endure his yelling at her about the freaks.

He was still ranting when the door bell rang. He opened it with "What the hell do you want, you expletive ," before he realized it was group of policemen. When they asked about his wife's nephew he ranted more about the worthless boy who ran away, and if they find him they could keep him. He'd had enough, and why weren't the police arresting the freaks who had come to check on the boy that afternoon, and vandalized his house. The two uniformed men and two plain clothed detectives came in and looked at the damage. The one in the bowler hat, who had a limp and a glass eye that didn't match his real

eye, looked in the cupboard and asked about the mattress on the floor.

When Dursley said that that was where the boy slept when he was being punished the other detective seemed to become more interested. When they asked to see where the missing boy slept normally, they didn't get an answer, and one of the uniformed men went upstairs to check it out. The Dursleys couldn't provide a picture of the missing boy. Nor could they produce any of his clothes, toys, or other possessions. The uniformed cop reported that there was no indication that anyone except the adults and Dudley slept upstairs, at which Dudley entered the conversation by saying that his freak cousin always slept under the stairs, and it was fun to stomp on the stairs when he was locked in. When asked if he did it often, he said not only him, but his dad did it. Vernon was getting very red, and ordered Dudley to his room while the police were there. It was at that point when the normal looking detective decided to take the whole family to the station and interrogate them separately. He was convinced that there was something very wrong here. There were so many terrible things that could be done to a child, and nothing he had seen or heard made him think that they hadn't been done to the missing Harry Potter.

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"This is called Floo travel, Harry. You throw in a pinch of floo-powder, step into the green fire, and call out you destination. We're going to a place called The Swamp. Luna, are you ready? Can you show Harry how it's done? Thank you dear. See, Harry, when the fire turns green, it doesn't hurt to be in it. See how she keeps her arms at her sides. It may help to keep your eyes shut, too. I know I like it better when my eyes are shut. It can be a pretty dizzying experience. Just remember to say the name clearly. Ready, here you go. I'll throw the powder in. And now in you go! Keep those arms down.

"What a way to travel! You'd think they'd come up with a way to let a family go together. Oh well, THE SWAMP!"

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When she arrived at the Croaker house, she saw Harry and Luna staggering around like drunks, falling down, laughing, and getting up to do it again.

"Alright, that's enough you two. It doesn't make you that dizzy. Hello Algie, Rosamond. How are you?"

"We're just fine, Selene. My, how Luna's grown. But I don't know this other boy."

"This is my husband, Harry Lovegood," Luna answered, taking Harry's hand.

Rosamond's eyes widened, and Algie's mouth opened.

"I told you she had her own ideas. Luna, can you wait here while Mrs. Croaker, Harry, and I talk privately. Mrs. Croaker's a healer, and I'd like her to check Harry's health. Come on, Harry."

The two women and Harry left. Algie sat down, and asked Luna to sit down, too. "So, Luna. How long have you known Harry?"

"All my life. Mummy's been telling me about how he saved everyone, but now I'm not sure. Harry doesn't remember saving everyone, but he is smart, so that part of the story is right."

"What do you mean, he saved everyone?"

"He defeated the Dark Lord and saved everyone. I thought everyone knew the story. Mummy said that there were parties and everyone was happy, except for Harry, because his mummy and daddy were killed."

"I see. Yes, he wouldn't be very happy when that happened. And when did you get married?"

"We didn't get married."

"But you said he was your husband."

"That's right."

"But you have to get married to have him become your husband."

"Oh, bugger! Then I guess we'll get married when he comes back with Mummy."

"It usually takes longer to have a wedding than that."

"A wedding?"

"That's where you have a special party to get married."

"Did you have a wedding?"

"Oh yes. About seventy years ago. Mrs. Croaker and I got married."

"Can you tell me about it?"

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Harry held Aunt Selene's hand as they followed the other woman. Aunt Selene wasn't at all like Aunt Marge. She was pretty, for one thing. And she had a nice house, and she smiled, and said happy things and made him feel good. Aunt Marge did none of those things. He was a little nervous around this other lady, so he held Aunt Selene's hand tighter. She looked at him, and could see him tense up.

"Don't worry, Harry. I won't let anything bad happen to you. Mrs. Croaker's a healer. I'd like her to look at your back and legs and make sure you're healthy."

"I don't want her to see my back."

"Why not?"

"Because I was bad."

She stopped, and picked him up, and held him for a moment, whispering soothing words. Rosamond waited patiently. When she

saw Harry relaxing in Selene's arms, she led them to a bedroom. She asked Harry to stand still and brought out a wand. He cringed when she approached him, so she made colored bubbles appear from its end. Then she made sparks appear, then different color lights. Then she cast a diagnostic charm, and moved it all around him. This wasn't as interesting as the other things she did with the wand.

Selene asked Harry to take off his shirt, but Rosamond told her it wasn't necessary. They then walked Harry back to the living room. Selene gave them a book she had brought along for this situation, and stepped into the dining room with the Croakers to discuss the situation.

"So, your seven year old daughter kidnapped Harry Potter to have her way with him," Algie joked.

"Oh, quiet you. More like rescued, if what I diagnosed was any indication," said his wife.

"That's my feeling, too. The home life he told me about! Those people ought to be locked up! I can't let him go back there."

"But you can't keep Harry Potter, even if you change his name. Everyone knows about his green eyes and the scar. You just won't be able to get away with it."

"I was thinking about that. We can use some Eye-Die (TM) to change his eyes' color. I was thinking we can check with an opti-mage while we're on vacation and see about corrective eye magic, too. That would help with people who know Harry Potter wore glasses. Can you do anything about the scar, Rosamond?"

"Sorry, no."

"I may be able to get you in contact with someone who can help. I know one of the cosmetic mages of the Federal Bureau of Inquisition in the New World. That's where you'll be on vacation, right? He may be able to do something."

"Oh thank you. . . ."

"Don't thank me yet. He's a by the book kind of guy. He won't help unless you have legal rights to Harry."

Selene went from happy to sad in less than a second.

"You better have some plan about that, after raising her hopes like that!" his wife threatened.

"We could avoid the Ministry if we went through the Muggle system. We'd need to talk to the boy's guardians."

Rosamond and Selene brought Algie up to speed on what they knew and suspected about those guardians.

"Well, we'll still probably have to get them to sign some papers. Do you know where they live?"

"No. And when I tried to find out, I found that that Harry's information is only available to the head of the Wizengamot and the Minister of Magic. I did find out that Lucius Malfoy, Brandon Nott, and Walden MacNair have tried to gain access to it, too. I'm heartened that they failed, but worried that they tried. How can we find them if we can't get into the file? And I certainly want to involve as few people as possible -- especially people in the ministry."

"There's another avenue of research, if you're willing to use it." She looked like she would reserve judgment until she heard it, so he continued. "The Goblins. They probably hold his parents' will. They would know the address of his guardian."

"But would they give that information out? I would think if it were that easy, the Death Eaters would have already found him."

"Bring Harry with you when you ask. . . ."

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Harry and Luna read for a few minutes, and then started looking around the strange room. There was a definite eagle motif to the

room. They could see the adults in the other room, but couldn't hear anything. Luna said they used a silencing charm on the doorway so sound could get through.

"So we could make as much noise as we wanted and they won't know?" Harry asked. Luna giggled, and then became serious.

"Harry, I found out something from Mr. Croaker. You're not my husband."

"I'm not?"

"No. We have to be married and then you become my husband."

"How do we get married?"

"He said it takes a lot of time and work, and you get all your friends and family together, then the man and woman take a vow and then they're husband and wife. And afterward they often have a party. But it sounds like the vow is important."

"So how do you vow? Uncle Vernon used to vow all the time, mostly about punishing me. And he made those vows come true. What do we vow?"

"We vow to love, honor, and obey each other for our whole lives."

"OK, I vow that."

"No, silly. That's not how you vow. Hold hands and say it like this: I, Luna Sulva Lovegood vow to love, honor, and obey you for the rest of my life. Now you say it."

"I, Harry James Potter. . ."

"Lovegood."

"Lovegood, vow to love, honor, and obey you for the rest of my life."

They felt dizzy, but neither of them noticed the slight blue glow that surrounded them. It was probably too late, but the adults in the other room didn't notice it either.

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In the bottom draw of the Headmaster's desk, an old, magical artifact puffed out red smoke. This wasn't the red smoke that Dumbledore had seen before. That was rather rust colored. This was a bright red. If anyone had seen it, they would have been reminded of Valentine's Day. However, no one saw it.

manaphobia - Wizarding term for "fear of magic."

AN - Bollywoggles and their hair snarling attributes were first reported in the stories of michelle-31a Read her stories -- they're good.

The Federal Bureau of Inquisition came from another story that I didn't note; However, that author claimed it had come from another story, which I know I never read. To the originator, whoever you are, thank you.

Thanks to Hermione Green for being my beta reader.

Chapter 3 The Breaking of the Wards

Selene floo-ed home the next day at lunchtime.

"Oh, Harry!" she gasped. He and Luna had just come in. They had been playing by the stream, and were very muddy. "Quickly, get those socks and shoes off. Get upstairs and get to the bathroom. You too, young lady. Get out of those muddy things and clean up before lunch."

She followed Harry upstairs, and got him out of his muddy clothes, and wiped him down with a wet wash cloth while he stood in his underwear. She ran a comb through his hair, realized the futility, and was about to send him to the bedroom to get changed when Luna came in, also in her underwear.

"Luna Lovegood! You knock before you enter a bathroom with a closed door. Harry, to the bedroom. You have to get in some clean clothes."

She resolved to speak to them tonight about privacy. She tossed Harry clothes, and they were soon floo-ing to Diagon Alley. She cursed the idiots on both sides who kept the bank from being connected to the Floo network.

She had borrowed a cap from the Muggle Clothes locker (used by the Aurors), and had warned Harry to keep his head down. She might as well have told the wall. Once he was through the alley behind the Leaky Cauldron, and into Diagon Alley, he was all eyes, all over the place. Selene couldn't really scold him right there - telling someone to be inconspicuous was a sure way of drawing attention to oneself. She just moved quickly, and wouldn't let him slow them down. It might have looked like she was being mean to him, but she didn't know what else to do.

They got to Gringotts without incident. Once again, Harry was looking all over the place, staring at the goblins, and the large room. She went to a goblin who had no one else waiting, and asked to see someone about the conditions of a will. The goblin looked at her and asked to know whose will. She told him she didn't want to speak

about it in a public place. He led them down a hall to a small office. Several minutes later another goblin came in.

"I am Hornswaggle. I am a very busy goblin. What is this about?"

"I would like to find out some information from the will of James and Lily Potter."

The goblin looked surprised for a moment, and then seemed to grow angry. "And what gives you the right to this information?"

"My name is Selene Lovegood, and this is Harry Potter." She removed his hat. She showed him the scar. She pressed on, knowing that they could get thrown out at any moment unless she convinced him. "Several days ago, Harry Potter ran away from his guardians who were abusing him. I have been caring for him, and have decided to try to gain the legal right to raise him. However, in order to do that, I must speak to the boy's aunt and uncle, so again, I would like to get that information from James and Lily's will."

"You're not trying to gain control of the Potter's money?"

"I have no knowledge of any Potter money, nor do I desire to access it. I want to protect Harry from abuse, and give him a family. That's all."

"So, you realize that if you adopt him, and he changes his name, he may lose any right to his parent's estate."

"What about my parents?" Harry piped up.

"If this witch takes you, you may not get anything your parents left you. Is that what you want?"

Until Luna rescued him, he didn't know anything about his parents. Selene had found some pictures of them; she had been at school with Lily and James. Suddenly, an idea of "parents" who treated him like Petunia and Vernon treated Dudley was replaced with images of two real people that Harry would have given anything to know. "What did my parents leave me? If it's mine you shouldn't keep it."

"You're not allowed to have it until you are seventeen. But if this witch raises you, you might not get anything."

Harry looked at Selene with a hurt look.

"Harry, I don't know exactly what he's talking about. But it sounds like the choice is to go back to the Dursleys and get your parent's gift to you when you are seventeen, or you can stay with us. I'm sorry, sweetheart, I didn't make the rules."

Harry thought for a moment. He thought of all the gifts Dudley got on his birthdays and at Christmas. He always seemed so happy to get the gifts. But then Harry thought about after the holiday -- how almost all of the presents were broken within a day or so.

He smiled. "Aunt Selene, I want to stay with you, Uncle Larry, and be Luna's husband."

Selene reddened. She still hadn't gotten the kids to stop that. "That's the answer, Hornswaggle. We'd rather be a family. So if it's possible, could you please give me the information?"

The goblin nodded. He left the room for a few minutes. When he came back he had a folder. He sat behind the desk, and looked it over. He seemed to look at the same pages several times. He produced a small bell from somewhere and rang it. A goblin opened the door almost immediately.

"Get Hackle," Hornswaggle said. The other goblin disappeared.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Hornswaggle?"

"Yes there is, Mrs. Lovegood. It appears that this will was not executed as specified, and I want to know why."

A goblin in a pin striped suit came in. He glanced at Selene and Harry, and turned to Hornswaggle. "Need a legal document set up? You picked wisely. There's no better law firm than Badger and Hackle."

Hornswaggle answered, "I have one already. Why wasn't this executed per our customer's instructions?" He held up a paper for the lawyer to see.

Selene had never seen a goblin pale before. On reflection she had to say the color didn't suit them. The two goblins switched to Gobbledegook and yelled at each other. The lawyer goblin left and Hornswaggle turned back to Selene.

"The will includes a set of instructions for who is to take care of Mr. Potter. First would be his godfather Sirius Black. Then his godmother Alice Longbottom. If they are unable to fulfill the request then those two and three other people, friends of James and Lily, were to find a Wizarding family to raise him. All five were charged with keeping an eye on how Harry was raised. It seems that at the time that this should have been done the head of the Wizengamot overrode the will and placed Harry with his Muggle relatives with the belief that he would be safe there. The Goblins are under no obligation to obey the Wizengamot. It seems that Hackle gave in to pressure. I, however will not."

"So, with permission of the four remaining friends listed I can gain legal guardianship of Harry?"

"No. There is only one person left on the list. Peter Petigrew, Alice Longbottom, and Candice Bones are incapable of executing their office. Only Remus Lupin is left."

"Candice? Oh, Candice McCarthy, she married Edgar Bones. And Remus, yes. He should have been in Ravenclaw. I sometimes wonder if he had been. . . . But anyway, do you know how I can contact him?"

"I will contact him, and arrange a meeting here at his earliest convenience. I will be in contact."

"Thank you, Mr. Hornswaggle."

"You are welcome, Mrs. Lovegood."

They hurried back the length of Diagon Alley, and Selene thought they made it without attracting undue attention.

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After all that, she was late getting back to work. She apologized to her boss, and promised to work late.

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Warned by his wife, Larry fed the children. Afterwards, as Luna and Harry started working on the dishes, he helped with a little magic. He wasn't very good at household spells, though, and broke a glass. It was fixed with a Reparo spell, and he left the children to it. After they got ready for bed, he read to them from Gulliver's Travels, the version written by Lamuel Gulliver himself; not the Muggle version that Swift wrote after Gulliver had too much to drink once in a pub. Then it was time for bed.

He had been struggling with the Centaur racing story all day. Part of the problem was the lack of information -- he had one comment that Fudge bet heavily on Centaur races. He also knew, from the Centaur family that lived in the woods nearby that no Centaur would engage in such an act. Obviously, the only conclusion was that the Centaur racers were forced, and such a thing would be highly illegal. Logic ran out about that point, though, and the gaps he had to fill in were huge. Making assumptions on some of them -- like who, what, where, when -- seemed to lead to more questions, not answers.

He put aside the story on the races, and looked over his files. He picked out a Harry Potter sighting, and chuckled. Oh, yes, he remembered reading this one when it arrived at the Quibbler office. He quickly re-wrote it, Quibbler style, adding the human interest aspects, and put it in the "complete" stack. They would run it for one of the issues while he was away. He smiled, thinking that there would be an increase of vacations and day trips to Stonehenge. He made a note to talk to the Ministry officials in charge of the ancient artifact in a few months about the increased popularity of the attraction. He almost always got several articles out of a Harry Potter sighting. He smiled, and looked across the hall. He was a good boy; a bit quiet

and he seemed to be eager to please. Well, his daughter could have picked a lot worse for a husband. Wait -- they weren't really married. He had to get that idea out of his head. He'd get it eventually. He fumbled with the lock on the liquor cabinet again, gave up, and went back to the Centaur story.

It was dark when Selene came home. She took two bottles of butterbeer from the ice box, and flopped on the love seat in Larry's office, giving him one of the bottles.

"Hard day, dear?"

"Yes. Seems there was a special request from the Wizengamot to develop a spell as quick as possible. They're supposed to be intelligent. Don't they realize that you just can't create a spell by describing it's goals? These things take time! And I refuse to do vivisection on mail owls!"

"Why would they want you to do that?"

"They want to develop a spell that is similar to the mail owl's magical ability. But I can't tell you any more. And you can't print any of this."

"Yes, dear." Once upon a time he was controlled by the rules in place for Aurors. Now, being a newspaper man, he and Selene had come to a different agreement. He had agreed to never pursue or report on anything she told him he couldn't. They had agreed that their ability to confide in each other took precedence over his job, and even the public's right to know. He knew if she couldn't vent to him, the marriage would probably collapse under her frustrations. Well, he could live with the restrictions.

"Did you have any luck with it at all?"

"I got the Point Me spell to aim east. I think that was something. But the team gave up on that pretty fast. Oh, well. I'll probably be working more on it on Thursday. How were the kids?"

"Fine. Harry's so neat it's almost frightening. Oh, yes, I tried to help them with the dishes, but broke a glass. I fixed it, of course, but

decided they were better at cleaning up than I am. You'll have to give me a refresher on household charms."

"Maybe I should teach the kids. That would make the cleanup faster. I'm going to bed. Don't stay up much later, you have to go early tomorrow."

"Yes dear." He turned back to his article. He had given up trying to deduce the answers to the article's questions, and was now promising more investigation. It would have to do.

Selene opened the door to Luna's room. She saw the kids sleeping and took a quick breath at what she saw. Luna and Harry lay sleeping on their beds, that was all right. They really had no place else to put him. She couldn't see putting him on a couch for any length of time. Larry, however... But that was a different story. But they had conjured a bed and re-arranged the room to fit them both in. They were both asleep. She had no fears of two seven year olds getting into that kind of trouble.

One of the charms available to the spell-crafters of the ministry was an enhanced magical sense. They used it to "see" how their actions affected the spells they were forging. It slowly died away after casting, and hadn't dispersed totally. She saw magic in the room, faint lines that looked familiar, and some not familiar at all. She re-cast it to make sure she was seeing things correctly. The Never-Melt (TM) Candles glowed red and white with their fire and light magic even though they weren't lit. The animated nature scene on the wall glowed gray-red, green, and tawny with the illusion spell that made the plants and animals move in it. Similar colors were leaking out of the pages of Luna's books. Harry's bed glowed numerous colors with the residue of the conjuration that created it. All this was normal.

Luna's aura glowed with that light-yellow that indicated scrying, the mage-sight spell itself, and other knowledge based magics. It was the same color, but brighter, than what was in her own aura. It also indicated the Sight. She herself had never had a prophecy, but their aunt taught divination at Hogwarts. Yes, there was grey-red in her aura too, another indication of the Sight--the ability to see through illusions.

Harry's aura, though. That was something! There was that light brown that indicated animal-spells - an animagus? Creamy-blue splotches usually classified in the communication/empathy areas of magic were also visible. She wasn't sure what that could be. Perhaps a language talent? 'Barty Crouch knows about 200 languages,' she thought, 'perhaps Harry would be a polyglot.' The over all brightness showed him to be a powerful wizard. This was just his own aura, however. He was surrounded by other magic.

All around him glowed a purple field mixed with rusty-red. Protection and healing magic? No, the color was off for healing. It was some sort of blood magic. Blood magic used for protection? She had never heard of that. Nor could she understand the strand of it that stretched away through the wall. She looked at her wand and cast a quick Point Me. 'Hmmm,' she thought, 'west-north-west? Wales?' Then she realized she had used her modified version of the spell and her wand was pointing east. That would make the destination somewhere in the general direction of London. Harry had eventually confided in her that he lived in Surrey, but refused to give his address for fear of being sent home. She stopped asking because it made him upset.

Around his scar there was a dark shadow -- almost an anti-glow. It was the remains of the killing curse. She looked closer. There were faint black lines leading away from the scar. She counted, six. Six? Six lingering connections from the killing curse? This would bear more research.

She took a deep breath. She had been ignoring it, concentrating on the children's aura. But she couldn't avoid it any longer. What she thought she saw -- what she was afraid of finding -- was the braided creamy-blue lines of magic that joined their hands.

Muggles promised, gave their word, vowed, made oaths, and swore to the heavens above. It was just words, though. That was one of the underlying problems with Muggle/Wizard relationships. There were no consequences for them to go back on their words, because their words had no power.

Witches and wizards used words to shape the world. It was through words and motion that magic was forced to create a physical representation of Harry's bed. It was with words and will that the Wizarding world played with the forces of nature.

Unbreakable oaths, life debts, magically binding contracts -- all these were manifestations of the same effect of will upon the world's magic that made all spells viable.

A marriage vow was to a wizard and witch another spell. Like the other types of magical contracts, it could be broken, but the consequences were unpleasant. As she looked with sorrow at the magically visible manifestation of their vow, she hoped that they would avoid the problems that so many very young trothed couples encountered.

She didn't know how it happened. She thought it could have been spontaneous, but it was unlikely. Tears started running down her face as she looked at them. Children, playing adult games, were going to be left with adult consequences. She knew too many stories about young troths going bad. Infidelity, divorce -- these would be bad for Luna and Harry; but how do children know if their childhood friend will still be the person they want to spend the rest of their life with once they grow up? She hoped with all her heart that Harry would grow into a man that Luna could live with; and that Luna would do the same for Harry.

She looked towards the lighted office -- their marriage wasn't perfect, but no one's was. A hundred years or so ago a writer talking about the addition of "incompatibility" to the reason Americans got divorced said that if that were an acceptable reason then every marriage would be up for divorce, for men and women were incompatible. She had to admit that Larry wasn't the man she married. Only part of it could be blamed on that spell that hit him. Part of it she had to accept the blame for. Love is truly blind -- or at least passionate love -- and perhaps if she had seen his faults back then, they might not have been married. Of course, those faults didn't negate the mature love that had grown between them.

She looked at her children. Well, nothing to be done now, except to teach them to love each other. She would have to decide if she should tell Larry. There were pros and cons to doing that. She kissed them goodnight. Harry opened his eyes when she did.

"Go back to sleep, darling. All is well."

- - -

Remus Lupin converted the couch to a bed in his small flat near Boston. It was a lonely life, but one he was used to. Things were actually not going too bad. He had a job where they were accepting of his days off requests. He had overheard some rumors about him having Aids. He smiled; he had a much more dangerous communicable disease. He had a friend from childhood who helped him out on full moon nights. John Collin was now a priest. Remus thought it amazing that he was so accepting of the fact that not only werewolves existed, but that Remus was one. Remus counted his blessings. Father John locked him in a very secure basement room of the old church. But he did more than that. He gave Remus emotional support and wouldn't allow any disparaging remarks about Remus to be uttered in his presence. Remus wondered if the grocer that he worked for was so easy with the days off because of Father John. If so, it was one more thing for which he was grateful.

He was tired. Not from his job -- there had been no shipments to unload today. No, he was tired because in two nights it would be the full moon. He had the next three days off. The next two days he would be more and more irritable, and lose his almost legendary patience. The day after, he would be in pain. After Father John brought him back to his flat, he would cast a warming charm on the bathtub, and soak for hours. He smiled. Sometimes it was good to be a wizard.

He was startled by a tap at the window. He opened it up to admit an owl carrying a parchment with a Gringotts seal.

"Hang on, I don't get many owls. Sorry, I have no owl treats, but would some crackers do? And here's some water. Will you be waiting for an answer? Yes, I see you are. Give me a moment to read this."

He really was cut off from the Wizarding world. It was necessary. They made it necessary. No matter what they said, as soon as it was known that he was a werewolf, he would be fired. And they wondered why werewolves turned dark.

The letter didn't say much. They wanted to see him in relationship to a mistake that Gringotts had made, and could he meet with them at his earliest convenience? He wrote back that he would be at Gringotts at nine the next morning. No reason to put it off. And the earlier he went, the more manageable his emotions.

- - -

Selene was up at her usual time, as was Harry. Unlike the days she had to go to the office, she kept her nightgown on, and put on a bathrobe. She greeted Harry happily. Harry looked at her, concern on his face.

"It's not Saturday, is it?"

"No, dear. I don't work on Wednesdays. Uncle Larry goes in to work today. And I spend the day with you and Luna."

"That sounds fun. What are we going to do?"

"Well, one thing that isn't so fun. We have to do laundry. But before that we have to have breakfast. Would you like to help me?"

Harry nodded and got right to work. He stopped at one point, and watched in fascination as the whisk beat the eggs without anyone moving it.

"Magic is neat. When can I do magic?"

"Would you like to try this?" He nodded, and she showed him how to do the cooking charm using his wand. He caught on after just a few tries; she was impressed.

"If there was any doubt before, Harry, this eliminates it. You are a wizard. And a pretty smart one, considering how quickly you picked that up. Harry -- one thing. Children aren't supposed to do magic. So don't tell anyone about this, please. We could both get in trouble." He agreed, still beaming at the praise. Selene knew that the rules were rather laxly enforced when it came to teaching children household charms. But if the Ministry wanted to get you, it was still technically against the law. Harry was setting the table, Larry was coming down the stairs dressed in business robes, and Luna was brushing her teeth when the owl came. Selene quickly got the breakfast on the table and took the Gringotts letter.

She glanced at the clock, and saw they had over an hour to get ready. She penned a quick reply saying that she, Harry, and Luna would be there.

They ate a quick breakfast, and she sent the kids to get ready, while she went to do the same. She had a good feeling about the meeting coming up.

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Remus was at Gringotts well before the time of his appointment. Being more than punctual was a trait of which he was proud. He could even attribute at least one job to being first to apply. The other thing about being early was that sometimes you could get unpleasant events out of the way sooner, so as to brood about them the rest of day. Actually, he wasn't that bad; he was lonely, not melancholy. But if there was bad news, he wanted to know it as soon as possible. He recalled a song from around the time he was in school: Be always too soon/ be never too late/ at the time all bets must be laid - Gordan Lightfoot. He hadn't thought of that song in years. Damn, there he was remembering how long ago things happened. He hated thinking about the amount of time he had been out of school and all his dreams that had come to nothing. He wasn't that old, but sometimes he felt it.

He sat in the lobby, people watching. From the attitude of most of the people, there wasn't anything to worry about. One or two customers looked upset or worried; a couple (pure bloods, he was sure) acted

arrogant; and one young mother with two kids just looked harried. She held the hand of her boy, who held the hand of his sister. While the mother was trying to walk the children would move away to the extent of their reach, then suddenly move back like they were on a spring. The children would collide, and laugh, and started doing it again, until the mother spoke sharply. They settled down, and she talked to a goblin.

There was another dream that ran aground, having a family of his own.

A goblin came up to him and asked Remus to follow him. As they went down a hall, he saw the family ahead of him following another goblin. They were led into a room. When the goblin he was following reached the door he opened it and directed Remus in. His curiosity meter was definitely in the dead cat range. He found himself in a small office with a goblin, the blond woman, and two children.

The little girl was saying, "But afterwards, can we see the dragons, pleeeaaasse!"

The boy chimed in on the drawn out "please."

"That's enough. Both of you. Be quiet, now!" She looked up, and said, "Hello, Remus."

He stared at her, and then it hit him, "Selene Olivander! How are you? Do you know what this is all about? Are these yours? Uh, I'll be quiet now."

Selene laughed, and said, "Remus Lupin, let me introduce you to Mr. Hornswaggle. I'm Selene Lovegood, now, by the way. I had cause to ask Mr. Hornswaggle a question the other day, and he discovered a mistake had been made. You're here to help fix the mistake, I hope."

Remus realized that he was still no closer to finding out what he was doing here than when he came in. He turned to the goblin. "What sort of mistake was made?"

"It seems that the instructions in the will of James and Lily Potter weren't carried out."

His heart sank. He was going to profit from their deaths. He sighed. Had he known he would have stayed away.

The goblin continued, "You were listed as one of the people who was supposed to look out for the welfare of their child. In the event that his godfather or godmother weren't able to look after him, you, and several other people, were requested to come to a consensus on a home for Harry James Potter."

"WHAT! Who else? Who decided? And who decided to cut me out?"

"Remus, please calm down, you're frightening the children."

Remus suddenly stopped his rant. Why were children here? He looked at them closely for the first time. The girl looked a lot like her mother. The boy, though. . . . He was squinting at him, but looked afraid. Remus looked closer.

"Harry?" He looked at Selene. She nodded. Remus grabbed Harry for a hug, but the boy yelled, and jumped away. He was hiding -- Remus couldn't think of any other word -- behind Selene. She took the boy in her arms, and the girl rubbed his arm, and gave Remus a dirty look.

The goblin listed the deceased members of the list.

"Remus, Harry was being abused at Lily's sister's home. He has scars on his back, and as you just saw, he's afraid that people are going to hurt him when they move at him quickly. He's been doing better since he came to us earlier this week, but I'd really like to make it legal so no one can take him away. That's why I had Gringotts contact you. You can give this adoption your stamp of approval."

Remus looked at her and sat down heavily. "How did this happen."

"The Wizengamot decided to override the will and put Harry with his relatives. A few days ago, little miss mischief here -- have you met my daughter, Luna? -- decided to go get a husband. The details are still a

bit hazy how she was able to find him, but it seems that when offered a chance to leave his relatives, he jumped at it. Since then, they've been inseparable. When I found the scars there was no way I was going to let this kid go back there. Besides, we've fallen in love with him."

Harry had calmed down, and slid off Selene's lap. He sat in a chair away from Remus, though.

"Mr. Lupin, I take it you have not been monitoring the welfare of Mr. Potter?" the goblin asked.

"No. Dumbledore never told anyone where he was. I only met Lily's sister once, and I never knew her husband's name. I was unable to find them."

The goblin made some notes and said, "Very well. Time is money. It is your decision where to place Mr. Potter. Please inform us once you have decided. Thank you." The door opened by itself, and Remus and Selene looked at it, a little startled by their sudden dismissal.

"Really, Mummy, it's magic."

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Fifteen minutes after being shown out of the office, Selene, Remus, Harry, and Luna were in a Muggle restaurant having coffee or milk, depending on age.

"So, what can I do to convince you to let me have him."

"Let me talk to him."

"You want us to leave?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Harry, I'm a friend of your dad's. We went to school together. I'm sorry I startled you before. Let's start again. How do you do?" He held out his hand. Harry looked at it a moment and shook it. He wasn't squinting any more. Selene had given him his glasses back, explaining it was part of the disguise. She

didn't want people to know who he was, or where he was staying. She had recounted her discovery that Malfoy and company appeared to be looking for him.

"Your aunt and uncle weren't very nice to you, were they?"

At first reluctantly, then faster and faster, he told about Dudley's bullying, how he let no one be his friend, how he was beaten, how he was bad so he never got any presents at Christmas, the chores, the clothes, the names. Selene rubbed his back, while Luna held his hand.

Harry appeared to be making himself upset. Remus handed him his glass of milk to distract him.

"So, how's married life treating you?" He asked, hoping to get a laugh or at least a smile. He didn't expect the sudden change in his attitude.

"It's great! I get lots to eat, we play games and read books, there's a snake who's going to be a mummy who lives in the back yard. We do the dishes together! It's great being Luna's husband!"

It wasn't exactly the answer he was expecting.

"Luna, do you like having Harry living with you? You get along alright?"

She gave him a look that questioned his sanity. "Where else would my husband live? And of course we get along. We're married."

Selene put her face in her hand. "We haven't quite got that settled yet. To be honest there have been a lot of other things that were more important than convincing them that they can't get married until they're 17."

"Last question, Harry, do you want to stay with Luna and her family? At least until you've grown up enough to get a job and get your own place? This is an important decision, Harry."

Harry didn't hesitate. "Yes. I want to stay. I never want to go back to Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon's house. I want to stay with Luna, and Aunt Selene, and Uncle Larry."

"Very well, Harry. You have my blessing. Selene, I'll go tell the goblins. Do you want to come?"

"Better just send me the paperwork. I should get these two back before they become too restless."

"Alright. One more thing, can I come and visit?"

"Of course, Remus. Any time. We really didn't have any time to catch up with each other. The house is called the Meadow on the Floo network."

"I'm not on the network. But I can get to a public access fireplace. I'll come and visit you."

"Don't come after Friday, though. We'll be on vacation for two weeks. We have an international portkey scheduled to go midmorning Saturday."

They spoke briefly about the upcoming trip, until they could no longer ignore the antics of the two children. They went back to the Leaky Cauldron, and went their separate ways.

- - -

Mad-Eye Moody was at the Little Whinging police station looking over the interviews with the neighbors. Nothing! How could an eight year old just vanish without a trace? Actually, he knew. But Dumbledore claimed that the boy was still alive. He had given Vernon and Petunia Dursley Veritaserum, and while he knew they hadn't committed murder, they were guilty of abuse. They now had a social service worker assigned to them. Their excessive pandering to their son -- who now had numerous accusations of bullying leveled against him, as his victims felt more secure coming forward while the police were around -- and their treatment of their nephew led a judge to decide they were close to being unfit parents. They would receive counseling

or they would lose their son. From the report from the counselor they had a lot of issues to work through.

He finished the reports and decided to take one more look around the neighborhood. Maybe he missed something. He didn't think so, but it doesn't hurt to triple check.

- - -

Many books have been written about magic. How it works, why it works, why it doesn't work for Muggles, why there's an Occulus Reparo spell and a generalized Reparo spell, why complex magic never seems to work exactly as you expect, and so on. The relationship between magic and intent is, well not explained, but expounded upon (or more correctly -- obfuscated) in some very large tomes. It would be impossible to go into it in any depth here, but the short and sweet answer is that the more complex and powerful the spell, the more likely it is to not do what you want, especially if what you want isn't what you said. In other words, if what you said wasn't what you meant, then the chances of getting what you want are vanishingly small. The best reference for this is Murphy's Magical Laws and is found in most well stocked magical libraries. Usually misfiled.

The application of this bears directly on the events related here, because the wards around Privet drive were set up with a certain intention, and were complex and powerful. Dumbledore set up the wards as an extension of the protection given Harry by his mother. They were supposed to keep him safe. Whether they would have protected him from Death Eaters is a moot question, since they never found him and didn't get a chance to test the wards. What is well known to the police, Harry's adult friends, and a couple of Hogwarts employees -- but not the Headmaster -- is that they didn't protect Harry at all from the pain inflicted by his relatives.

Dumbledore tried to tie the wards into the idea of home and family and would say that as long as Harry had a home with the Dursleys the wards would protect him. What he never said to anyone, considering it of no importance, was that it took two tries to set the wards up. That may be because it was an extremely difficult and

complex spell. Or it could be that the idea of home and family, when talking about Harry and that family, wasn't a concrete enough idea to anchor a cantrip, let alone a powerful ward. In the end, what Dumbledore built the wards on was the legal definition of home. Not that he knew, since that wasn't his original intention.

- - -

With a stroke of his pen Remus changed that definition.

- - -

Moody had just detected the remains of magic in the back yard. It was subtle and faint, and he wasn't surprised he had missed it the first time he was there. He was running possible forensic spells through his head when the wards fell. Efficacy aside, they were strong. Every window in the Dursley house, and every window facing the Dursley house for half a block around was blown in. Mad-Eye was thrown to the ground. He picked himself up and Apparated to Hogwarts.

- - -

Despite her desire to get the kids home, Selene had one more stop to make. She took the kids half way down Diagon Alley, and into a little shop. Harry looked around in awe at the shelf upon shelf of boxes.

"Good afternoon, Selene. To what do I owe this delightful visit?"

"Uncle Ollie! Uncle Ollie!" The little girl ran over to the old man and grabbed him in a hug.

"Luna, my dear! What a delightful surprise. And who is this young man?"

Before Selene could answer, Luna blurted out, "This is Harry Lovegood, my husband!"

While Selene rolled her eyes the old man held out his hand to Harry.

"Hello, young man. I am Oliver Olivander, Mrs. Lovegood's uncle. As her husband, you do know that it is your job to take care of her? I expect you to do your job."

Harry nodded, slightly frightened by this man. He looked him in the eyes, and saw that they were the same color as Luna's. "Be a good husband, and we'll always be friends, Mr. Potter."

Selene gasped. Olivander chuckled.

Luna said, in her determined manner, "His name is Lovegood!"

"This seems like it would be an interesting story. Would you like to share it with me?"

"Not now. Why don't you come to dinner some day after we get back from vacation, two weeks from Saturday. I promise I'll tell you all about it. But meanwhile, I'd like to get them wands."

"You realize that they can't do magic?"

"Theoretically, school children can't do magic outside of school. They're not schoolchildren, yet." Selene answered with a smile.

"And also theoretically, they're too young to control magic, wand or not. It won't do any good."

"Harry cast a household charm this morning. He likes helping out around the house, and with very strict supervision," she looked at the two children, giving them the You Had Better Not Try My Patience look that parents are taught in parenting classes, "I would like to teach them. I've never felt that there was some magic age that all children had to be before learning magic. Harry's obviously ready. And Luna may be too."

"Very well, but if you get caught, keep my name out of it." The sting that might have come with his words was negated by his smile.

He put up a "Closed" sign on the door, and set to work on finding the children wands. After several attempts, Harry gave a cry, and sat down, holding his chest.

"What happened, Harry?" Selene asked, as she rushed to him.

"The purple line went away," Luna said.

"What purple line, sweetheart?"

"The purple magic line that went that way," she pointed vaguely south west.

"You could see the line? Can you see the other colors around Harry?"
Luna nodded. "And the black lines?"

"They're still there."

Olivander had no theories to give her, and Harry seemed fine after a minute, so they went back to testing wands.

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster, etc, sat at the head table in the Great Hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and took a bite of a lemon tart with which he intended to finish his lunch. With him was Professor Severus Snape. He would be here a few more days. He had potions brewing that were dependent on the lunar cycle. But once the moon was full, Severus would be gone too.

Hagrid was on the grounds, of course. But he didn't come in too often for meals. He could look after himself.

Just a few more days and the castle would be empty of everyone but him, the elves and the ghosts, and there was no reason to worry about the elves and the ghosts. They were fine without him. And that's what they would be. Come Monday he would be on the beach in Malta with Olympe Maxime and Igor Karkaroff. They would continue the 600+ year old tradition of the headmasters getting

together after the term complaining about the governors, the teachers, and the students, and getting drunk.

As he bit into the tart, alarms started ringing. He looked up, fear evident on his face.

"What is that racket, Albus?" asked the potions instructor.

"It's the blood wards I set up around Harry. Either his aunt and cousin have just died, or"

"Or what?"

"Or Harry Potter did."

He raced to his office. Or rather, he moved as quickly as a 150 year old man could move up several flights of stairs after eating a large lunch. He entered the office, tailed by Snape. Various silvery pieces were scattered all over the floor, desk, and shelves.

"What happened?"

"Feedback! When the wards collapsed, all the detectors I had attuned to them had a massive amount of magic flow through them. That one recorded any attempt to Apparate to the house. That one detected any portkey activity. That one used to indicate the appearance of house elves there..."

"Did house elves ever actually go to his house? Was he that spoiled?"

"No, he lived in a completely Muggle way. No, it was in case some Death Eater sent a house elf to Harry, it would warn me. Of course, it was a very delicate device, and spent more than half it's time out of commission. If I were a suspicious person, I'd say the Hogwarts elves weren't very careful when dusting around it."

"But none of that matters! We have to find out what happened!"

"Why? While it's a shame if any wizard child is killed, why is Harry Potter so important? He's just a child of a particularly annoying set of parents."

"You never forgave Lily for getting higher Potions grades than you, did you, Severus. Yes, it's sad when any child dies. But you were there! You heard the prophecy! Harry's supposed to defeat the Dark Lord!"

"And he did. His job is done, and he doesn't matter a kneazle's whisker anymore."

"But he didn't defeat him! You know that your dark mark hasn't gone away! He's still out there, somewhere, plotting, planning, waiting! Like a snake in the grass, looking for an ankle to bite! Harry hadn't finished his job. Now what are we going to do!"

"Albus, get a grip! You know as well as I that prophecies are tricky things. Was Potter the only brat born at the end of July whose parents had defied the Dark Lord three times? Are you sure the prophecy didn't just apply to what happened at Godric's Hollow? You. Have. To. Get. A. Hold. Of. Yourself!"

"You're right. I need to. We don't have all the facts. It may just be the Muggles who are dead."

At that point, Mad-Eye Moody entered the room.

"Albus! I'm just back from the Dursleys. The wards have fallen."

Snape answered sarcastically, "Thank you for that bit of old news."

"Were the Dursleys alright?" Dumbledore asked.

"There was some minor damage to the house, but they sounded alright when I left."

Dumbledore put his face in his hands, and said a very un-headmaster-like word.

AN: The law firm of Badger and Hackle ("Any lawyer can help you if you're innocent. It takes a great lawyer to help you when you're guilty.") was stolen without permission from Minnesota Public Radio's Morning Show.

NOTE: The number of black lines was originally listed as seven. This is incorrect, as there are only six. The text is now corrected.

Chapter 4 Vacation

Harry and Luna really enjoyed the rest of the Selene's day off. Selene introduced them to a number of household charms, some they could do, and some they couldn't. Levitating the dishes to the table didn't work. Getting the scrub brush to clean the dishes in the soapy water did. They couldn't make Scourgify work, but the drying charm for the clothes as they came out of the washer did. They couldn't create water with the Aquamenti spell, but they could cause water from a bucket to sprinkle the flower garden with the Fonticulus charm. It seemed that the more specific a spell was, like the stirring spell Harry learned that morning, the easier it was for them to learn. More generalized spells, levitation, or cleaning, or spells that actually created something, like the Aquamenti, were beyond their ability. That was OK. They could get some spell practice in, and still be fairly safe. She heard a sound from in the house - the fireplace was calling. She left the kids with the bucket of water and went in to talk to whoever was calling.

It was Mrs. Weasley calling her back. She had called this morning, but Molly couldn't talk at the time, and Selene had been gone all morning after she got the letter. She had to tell Molly that Luna wouldn't be over this Friday, they would be too busy getting ready for their vacation. They chatted for a few minutes, and closed the connection. Selene had been listening to the kids playing outside, and knew they weren't getting into too much trouble. She had heard Luna squeal, and Harry laugh. Then Harry yell, and Luna laugh. And while she didn't know what they were up to, she figured it couldn't be too dangerous. She went out to check on them, as she heard both of them laughing.

When she got outside she saw they were both near the stream, each had used the Fonticulus to direct a spout of water out of the stream to the other. They were totally soaked, and enjoyed every moment of it. She called a halt to the game, though, and took back the wands. She would not let them use them unsupervised again. She sent them into the house to shower and put on dry clothes.

The rest of the afternoon was lessons. They practiced writing, arithmetic, geography, and reading and vocabulary. Harry had a lot of

trouble learning to write with a quill, but Selene was encouraging, and it wasn't an unpleasant experience.

That evening they played a board game as a family, a new experience for Harry. They played the Wizarding version of Candy Land, where the figures were enchanted to move, and when they got stuck the pieces acted like they really were stuck or lost. Harry enjoyed it immensely. Two happy, tired children went to bed without a fuss after that.

Selene talked with Larry for a while. They discussed the preparations they still needed to do, his job, and the magic she had been teaching the kids. He was impressed, but worried about the under age rules. Selene made sure he understood that the children had to be actively supervised whenever they had their wands. She mentioned the water fight. They both had a good laugh at that.

Then she presented him with the legal documents that they had received from Gringotts. He looked them over, and signed under his wife's signature. He put a drop of blood in the correct box, and gave it back to Selene. They kissed in celebration of their new foster child. They turned off the lights, hooked arms, and went upstairs to celebrate some more.

- - -

The next day was a rainy day. Luna and Harry were issued their wands for cleanup after meals, but otherwise had to mostly keep themselves occupied. They did a little packing, and Harry had one anxiety attack when he was asked to get the luggage out of the cupboard under the stairs. Luna was the only one who noticed, though, and she calmed him down.

The big event of the day though was after Selene came home from work. She took Harry to the bedroom and put the Eye-Dye (TM) drops in. After having him keep his eyes closed for ten minutes, they checked them. After the looks he got, he ran to the bathroom to look at himself. His reflection stared back, except he had two big, brown eyes. He still looked like himself, but sort of not.

That night in bed Harry and Luna talked.

"I still find it hard to believe that there are wizards out there who want to get me because of something I did as a baby."

"But it was you. Everyone says it was. And I can still see the black spells touching your scar."

"How come you can see them, and I can't?"

"Mum says different witches and wizards have different gifts. You can talk to snakes. I can see magic. It's funny sometimes. When Mummy and Mr. Lupin were startled by the door opening, I knew it was going to happen, because I saw the spell go from the paperweight on the desk to the door."

"I think it would be much more useful to see magic than to talk to snakes."

"Mum says you might be an animagus, though."

"What's that?"

"A wizard who can turn into an animal."

"Any animal?"

"No, just one. And you don't find out until you try."

"I'd probably turn into a snake. That would be useless."

"I don't know, it might be interesting. You could probably get into a lot of places that people can't. You could become a spy! Or a private eye, like Encyclopedia Brown!"

"He doesn't turn into a snake to solve his cases."

"True, but he doesn't have the option either. I bet if he could turn into a snake he would."

"Well, I can't even turn into a snake, so it doesn't matter."

"I wonder if Mr. Lupin is an animagus?"

"What makes you say that?"

"He has some of the same brown color that you do in his magic. But there's some black, too."

"Does he have black lines?"

"No, just black magic. Sometimes seeing magic isn't really that useful. I can see the black and brown, but I don't know what it means."

They were quiet for a while, then Luna started again.

"Harry?"

"Yes, Luna."

"You know those lines from the dark curse?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to try to find what they're connected to?"

"I suppose. How are we going to do that?"

"Follow them, I suppose."

"When can we do that?"

"It will have to wait until after the vacation. But then we'll do it."

"OK. Do you think it will be dangerous?"

"I don't think so. The lines aren't very big."

"OK, then. Good night, Luna. I love you."

"Good night, husband. I love you too."

- - -

It was Harry's first vacation. He wasn't sure what to expect. He certainly didn't expect all the running around, packing, unpacking, and re-packing that they did on Friday. Nor the early morning breakfast, moving all the luggage into the living room, and the wait while Aunt Selene and Uncle Larry checked and double checked what they had packed, as if they hadn't done the same thing the day before. And he really didn't expect the strange, dizzying, unsettling, and nauseating trip that occurred after Uncle Larry took a book out of a box and had everyone touch it while holding the luggage. They called it a portkey, but he told Luna that it should have been called a puke-key.

They found themselves in a hotel room in New York City. He didn't expect New York City to be the way it was, either. He had trouble believing any building could be so tall, even while he was looking at them. That, more than anything else, helped him to come to terms with the fact that he had defeated the Dark Lord while he was still a baby. He had trouble believing it, but he finally accepted that it was true.

They went to the top of the World Trade center, visited Central Park zoo, and saw a Broadway show about a man who ran a circus. Luna and Harry kept singing the first line from the penning song: There's a sucker/ Born every minute. . . . Unfortunately, they couldn't quite remember the rest of the song.

They also met with Mr. Lacey, Croaker's friend from the FBI. He examined Harry's forehead, and declared the scar immune from magical healing because of all the dark magic that still surrounded it. He helped arrange a Muggle operation to try to hide it. They spent a day in the Muggle hospital, and Harry ended up with a big bandage on his forehead. Selene and Larry were given instructions on how to care for it.

They spent a week at a place called the Many Glacier Hotel in Glacier National park in the Rocky Mountains. They went on ranger led

nature hikes every day. One hike took most of a day, and took them to a small, round lake with cliffs around a third of it. The amazing thing was the lake was filled with chunks of ice, some as big as cars. It was called Iceberg Lake, and the water was very cold. They all pulled off their socks and shoes and waded in -- it had been a very hot 8km walk. They also played by the lake near the hotel, joining the other children in their effort to fill the lake with stones. Larry taught Harry how to skip rocks, and that slowed the eventual demise of the lake by a few hours as skipping rocks was slower than just throwing them in.

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While in one of the visitor centers, Luna looked at the 3d scale model of the park. "Daddy?"

"Yes, little spruce?"

"If you know what direction something is, can you find it just with that?"

"Not very well. But if you know what direction it was from two different places, you can find it. What are you looking for?"

"Oh, a treasure, I think."

"Sounds exciting, lodge pine. Let's say you know that the treasure is south of this peak, and east of this glacier. You go east from here, south from here, and where the two lines cross, there's your treasure. So, where is this treasure you're looking for? Is it in these mountains?"

"Oh, no. It's back at home."

"Oh, good. I'd hate to have to tell your Mum that you wandered off and was eaten by a bugbear while searching for treasure on our vacation."

"Are there bugbear in these mountains?"

"I don't know. But there are certainly enough bear, so it wouldn't surprise me at all. We'll have to keep our eyes peeled for evidence."

Harry whispered to Luna, noticing the funny looks Uncle Larry was getting from other visitors, "What kind of things are evidence?"

"Oh, Daddy can turn just about anything into evidence for the Quibbler."

"So there really aren't things called bugbears?"

"I don't know. I'll have to read the article Daddy writes and see what the evidence is."

Harry nodded, not sure what to say about that. He would have to keep his eyes open for evidence, too.

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They saw a lot of wildlife in their walks, but no evidence of bugbears. One hike had to wait for a grisly bear to get out the way on the trail. They saw eagles, deer, mountain goats, ground squirrels and cougar tracks. Luna insisted that she saw a small, gray jackalope, but no one else did. She told Harry later that she was glad it was only one of the small ones. The purple, mountain jackalopes ate bears and mountain lions as well as people, so if you ever see one, well, it's probably too late.

Harry just nodded and watched more carefully when they hiked.

Each evening there were ranger talks about the various subjects. There were talks on the plants and animals, the history, geology, and the native people. One talk had the ranger dressed up as an 1890's buffalo hunter. He pointed at the audience, and then Harry and said, "Now imagine you're a herd of buffalo and I shoot him. What would you do?" He asked the little girl on the other side of Harry.

"I'd cry."

"Nope! Buffalo don't cry. . . ."

Luna piped up, "I'd trample you for killing my husband." That got a laugh from the rest of the audience.

"Nope, buffalo are about the dumbest animals alive. If he's dead, that's his problem. You'd go back to eating your grass..." and the lecture continued.

Later that night Selene had another talk with Harry and Luna about not telling people they were married. She had given up trying to tell them that they weren't married. Especially as she knew that Luna could see the magical vows.

Harry's birthday came while they were in the mountains. Selene held a family conference in the hotel room. Harry accepted that he had to hide from the followers of the Dark Lord who still hated him. So they decided to change his birthday. They would move it to the beginning of September, and make him a few months younger and put him in the next school year. What sold the deal to the kids was that Harry would be in the same class as Luna when they started school at 11. Otherwise, she'd have to stay home for a year after he went away to school. They both wanted to stay together, so they agreed. Harry got a kiss from Selene and Luna for his real birthday and a promise of a party on his new birthday.

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Remus was getting up when a knock came at his window. He let the owl in and retrieved a thick envelope from it's leg. The letter was from Gringotts.

July 31, 1988

Mr. Remus Lupin:

In the will of the late Mr. and Mrs. James Potter certain funds were set aside to paid to the people with responsibility to guard and guide their heir, Harry James Potter. No instructions were given for the situation where some of those so designated would not be able to carry out their responsibility. Nor were your exact responsibilities

specified. Therefore, it is our decision that you, as the only person still able to fulfill this request be paid the entire monthly amount that would have gone to the five designated people. As this is contingent on you executing your responsibility, we expect written confirmation that you are doing so each month.

This month's payment has been placed in your vault, and is recorded on your monthly statement, which is included with this communication.

May your gold breed,

Hornswaggle

Remus checked his statement. His eyes widened. His monthly salary had just doubled. He let the owl go, and sat down to think.

He was a proud man. With so much taken away, he felt that his pride was something he couldn't afford to lose. He hated getting charity, and he hated getting it because of James and Lily's death.

But it wasn't charity, was it? It was more a salary. And if he was being paid to do a job, by God he'd do it well. His pride wouldn't accept anything less.

But how to do it? He'd have to see Harry at least once a month; preferably more. He could invite him over. Well, maybe not. But if he used some of the money to get a better place. . . . He would write Harry, and he'd tell him all about his parents. Yes, he could earn the money, and be part of Harry's life, too.

He noticed the time. He was going to be late! He rushed to get ready.

Later, during his walk to work, he realized what day it was.

"It's Harry's birthday, but I got the best present of all!"

- - -

The Lovegoods portkeyed to a magical resort in Washington State. There they went on hikes and saw magical creatures. The highlight of

the trip was a hike led by a Sasquatch named Saul. He was very funny. At one point they saw a bear on another slope, perhaps a bit less than a kilometer away.

"Anyone know how to tell the difference between a male and a female bear, without being so close that you get mauled? No? Well there really isn't a very good way. But if you see a big bear with up to four little bears, it's a female. Unless the big bear is busy stuffing the little bears into it's mouth. Then it's a male."

Harry asked about jackalope.

"Ah, most of them are pretty easy going. You leave them alone, they leave you alone. But the giant, purple variety are killers. The chromium in their fur that gives them the pink or purple color also makes them almost as impervious to physical or magical attacks as dragons. They're carnivorous, and work in packs. In other words, bad news, stay away. You mostly see them further east and north, in less populated areas of the Rocky Mountains."

The room they stayed in while in Washington was similar to the hotel room in New York, a large room with two queen sized beds in it. Harry and Luna slept in the same bed, but found it uncomfortable. Luna was an active sleeper, and the larger bed didn't seem to protect Harry with distance -- no matter how far from her he slept, she wound up rolling into, or onto him during the night. At the Many Glacier Hotel the rooms were so small that there wasn't enough room to fit the whole family in one, so Harry and Luna had a room with two twin beds, and during that part of the trip he had had quiet nights.

One new thing that happened after his birthday was Luna would kiss him goodnight every night. And they would tell each other their love.

- - -

If anyone had noticed, they would have said that it was the most incongruous group they had ever seen lounging on the beach on Malta. There was a very old man with shoulder length, white hair, and a beard that would reach his belt, if it weren't casually tossed over his shoulder. He wore Bermuda shorts, and sandals, and a T-Shirt that

read "Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards." He downed a small glass of ouzo in one gulp, and put the empty glass next to the half dozen others on the table next to his chair. To his companions, he looked ridiculous.

The other man had dark hair, and a big bushy black beard, that was at least six inches long, and cut flat across the bottom. He wore a long sleeve shirt, and long pants, despite the heat, and boots. If anyone else had noticed him, they would have said he looked like a Cossack. He drank dark beer from a huge, glass stein. His companions, keeping their impressions to themselves, thought he looked ridiculous.

The third member of the group was a rather good looking woman. She probably would have been better looking if she hadn't had her hair up in such a tight, severe bun. It didn't do anything for her. She wore a bikini and had been for most of her vacation, and sported a rather nice tan. She was also over nine feet tall and well proportioned for her height. She lay on a magically expanded lounge chair, and drank a diet cola, liberally enhanced with rum. Held by the string that tied the bikini bottom together was her wand. Her companions, more used to seeing her in a very different, formal environment, thought she looked ridiculous.

They would have stood out, except for the Notice-Me-Not wards around them. They took turns getting drinks. They had had to expand the table that held their empties. That was a tradition.

This was the traditional end-of-the-school-year gathering of the headmasters' of the three top Wizarding schools in Europe. The usual goals of commiseration, exchange of embarrassing stories (about other people), and getting drunk were only partially being fulfilled this year. For some reason, Dumbledore was not getting into the spirit of it all. In a word, he was morose.

His friends had tried to talk to him, draw him out. But it didn't work. That could be because the unwritten goal of the gathering was collecting inside information about the other schools, or -- even better -- blackmail material. They were just too used to the game, and Albus didn't give anything away.

After several days, Olympe Maxime and Igor Karkaroff came up with a different plan. Unlike headmasters in the past, the relations between the three schools were much more friendly, and they really didn't try to achieve the unwritten goals. In fact, they worked to keep each other from getting too drunk. But, in an effort to help their friend, they decided to let him get as smashed as he wanted, and see if that didn't loosen him up a bit.

It seemed to have worked.

"We're doomed! Doomed, I say! I don't know how I'll face the children again, knowing that there's no hope."

"Dumbly-door, please tell us, so we may have trouble facing our children, too."

Misery loves company, and Dumbledore was to the point where he could share the wealth. "It's the Dark Lord, Voldemort. He's not destroyed, he's just without corporeal form. He's going to come back some day, and the boy who's prophesied to defeat him died."

Karkaroff paled listening to Dumbledore's words. "Albus, what do you mean, he's not destroyed. Of course he was destroyed! That Potter boy did it -- somehow."

"No, my friends. He only postponed the battle between good and evil. No, I foresaw a momentous, epic battle, with thousands of dead strewn on the field of battle, and noble, Gryffindor, strong Harry Potter defeating the Dark Lord in a magical duel that would be the talk of generations, and ending the reign of evil for all time. And then Glenda the good witch of the south would come and take him home to live happily ever after."

Igor and Olympe looked at each other, worried expressions on their faces. "Maybe six wasn't a good number, my dear Igor."

"Albus, why do you think the Dark Lord isn't gone?"

"The mark, Igor. The mark still has active magic. He's weak! But he's still there. I've studied Snivelus' extensively.

"Snivelus, Snivelus. . . . He said maybe I'm not reading the prophecy right. Maybe someone else fits the prophecy, too, and Harry's unfortunate death doesn't matter! This could be it!" He started fumbling for his wand.

"Dumbly-door, what are you doing?"

"I must protect the prophecy! I'll just Oblivate you while you're not looking, and we'll all just go on with our vacation."

Karkaroff finished his beer, and brought the heavy mug down on the Hogwarts' headmaster's head, muttering "Stupefy!"

"Don't drink and hex," he said, as he went to get another round of drinks for the still conscious heads of the three greatest schools of magic in all of Europe.

- - -

"Alright, Mr. Lupin! Confess! It's no good trying to hide!"

"And what exactly am I supposed to be hiding, Fr. John?"

"You've been walking around like the cat who ate the canary. You're so happy, it's annoying the rest of us. Who is she, and when do you bring her over for dinner at the Rectory?"

Remus laughed. "Sorry, I'm lucky, but not that lucky. Less than two weeks ago the son of some deceased friends of mine came back into my life. Seems I was supposed to be keeping track of him these last six years, and only now is the will being enforced. But I know the woman who's going to be his foster mother, and she's a good person."

"And will you be bringing her to dinner at the Rectory?"

"She's married. But she rescued Harry from an abusive family, and is providing a loving home."

"And you'll be involved in his life now? And that's why you're happy?"

"Yes. It's like," and he paused, trying to think of a word. "It's like being part of a family."

"Then you'll have to bring the whole crew over for dinner some time."

- - -

It seemed like in no time the vacation was over. They portkeyed back to their house, and put away the portkey/book, which had started out blank. They had filled it with their activities each day. It was now a souvenir and keepsake of their trip.

Harry's bandages came off. There were several small scars still on his forehead. But the lightning bolt shape was gone. Selene had another talk with Luna and Harry about keeping his identity secret. They had come up with a story about his parents being killed in the war against the Dark Lord, and him living with Muggle relatives for a few years until they too died in a car crash. That's where he got his scars. The simplicity and truth of the story would make it easy to remember.

Things went back to what Luna considered normal. They played a lot when her father was working in the house. They were allowed their wands to clean up, and Selene tried to teach them more charms. Some they mastered - lighting the stove, cleaning the rugs, extinguishing real candles. Some they didn't get - cleaning the bathtub, bug repellent. Sometimes she understood the reason - for example the bathtub cleaning was too close to the general purpose Scourgify. Sometimes she didn't.

Their lessons continued even though it was summer. Harry mastered writing with a quill, and concentrated on his penmanship.

- - -

"Daddy?"

"Yes, tulip?"

"Can you get me a map?"

"What kind of map?"

"Oh, of the world, I suppose."

"OK, daisy."

- - -

Uncle Ollie came to dinner soon after they returned from vacation. He listened to the story of how Harry had joined the household. He was impressed with Harry's disguise, but suggested that they do something about his hair. James had had very similar hair. He suggested that they either let it grow long, or cut it very short.

Harry related his experience with the haircut -- or more accurately hair hack -- that Petunia had given him, and how it had grown back over night. They decided to try it, and Selene promised to try to make it look good, and maybe Harry's accidental magic wouldn't kick in.

Ollivander seemed happy to have Harry in the family, and asked him if he had any interest in wand making. Harry confessed that he hadn't given it any thought. Upon prompting from his new uncle, he agreed to think about it.

- - -

"Daddy?"

"Yes lilac?"

"Can you show me where we live?"

"Yes. Let me see. This is Great Britain, and see London there? We're about three eighths of an inch to the left of that, somewhere around there."

"That's really small. Is there another, bigger map available?"

"Is there a particular part of the world you're interested in seeing better, cabbage?"

"Britain, I think."

"OK, I'll get you one. But on this one, you can see how far we traveled on our vacation. . . ."

- - -

They tried giving Harry a hair cut the day after Ollivander had visited. It was cut to between a quarter and a half inch long. Selene and Luna agreed that it looked good, and Harry agreed, but said that the image in the mirror wasn't him. Selene smiled at that, and pointed out that that was the goal, and no matter what he looked like on the outside, he was still Harry on the inside.

Luna and Harry thought the feel of the crew-cut was strange, and kept running their hands through it. Luna more than Harry.

The next day the hair remained short. Harry let out a sigh of relief. Luna complained that her hair was (in her words) "yucky." Selene told her it would look better if she brushed it. When Selene had gone to work, Harry brushed Luna's hair for her. Luna thought that getting her hair brushed was very nice. After that it became part of their nightly traditions for Harry to brush Luna's hair.

- - -

Another big change in Harry's life occurred the Friday after they returned from their vacation. On most Fridays both Selene and Larry went to work and Luna, and now Harry, too, went to the Weasleys. When Harry got there he found, to his discomfort, that he was the center of attention. He was engulfed in a hug by Mrs. Weasley,

introduced to Ginny, "Who will be in your year" (whatever that meant), Ron, who was eight ("It will be nice to have another guy to play with"), the twins who were ten ("I'm George, he's Fred." "Wait a minute, I thought I was George!" "Oh, that's right, I made a mistake. As he said, I'm George." "And don't you forget it!"), Percy, who was going to be in his second year at Hogwarts ("Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lovegood."), Charlie, who was 14 ("Hi"), and Bill, 15 (who gave something between a "Hi" and a grunt).

Ron apologized for his oldest brother. "Don't mind him. Mum says that happens to teenagers. They get all surly and unfriendly."

"Why's that?"

"Don't know. But I heard her talking to Dad about teenagers have more moneys, whatever those are, and it causes problems."

Harry didn't know what to say about that. He was feeling a bit confused with all the red-headed kids around. It didn't help that Fred and George were still going on about who is who, and switching every few minutes which name they agreed meant which one.

"Want to go out to play?"

"Sure."

They were followed a moment later by Luna and Ginny.

"Oh, no!" Ron groaned. "The girls."

"What's wrong with girls?"

"They always want to play girl games, like house."

"I've played house with Luna, it's fun."

Ron looked at Harry as if he were diseased.

"You can't be serious! It's all about cooking and cleaning. . . ."

"I cook. Breakfast at least. And we clean. It's a lot more fun when you work with someone."

Ron wasn't sure what to make of this new boy, but he didn't want to become like him.

"Don't you play other games?"

"Sure. We play Aurors and Robbers, and Pirates, and we explore the back yard." He looked around. The "back yard" of the Weasleys appeared to be a nebulous term. While the Meadow's yard ended at the woods, the Weasley's yard included a large vegetable garden, a field, a pond, and perhaps an apple orchard. There was no real stopping point. "This is neat," he said, looking around.

Ron looked around, confused. He didn't see anything neat about it. It was just the yard.

"Come on, Harry! I want to show you something," Luna yelled as she ran away. Harry smiled, and ran after her, followed by Ginny and Ron. Luna led them to a large maple tree half a field away. There she grabbed a branch about four feet off the ground, swung her legs up around it so she was hanging upside down like a sloth, hooked a foot on the trunk, and leveraged herself over the branch. She then stood up on the branch, and climbed to another a bit higher, and further around the tree.

"Come on Harry," she said.

Harry tried to do what she did, and after a few tries got his feet up to the branch. It took a little while, but he was able to get himself on the top of the branch eventually, too. At that point, Luna moved to the next branch over, and higher up. Harry started following.

"It's not fair!" Ginny complained. "I can't climb."

"We can help you up," Harry offered.

"No, Mum says that ladies don't climb trees. Besides, I'm wearing a dress." Harry noticed she was wearing a sun dress. It was loose

enough to allow her to run, so he couldn't see why it would interfere with climbing a tree. Luna, like Harry, was wearing shorts, which seemed right on that hot, summer day.

"That's too bad," Ron said, as he tried to get on the first branch by crawling over it, which sort of left him hanging with his arms over the branch with nothing to do except hold him there, and his feet kicking free without anything to push against. He dropped to the ground to try again, which wasn't any more successful.

"You should be able to climb, even in that dress," Harry said, trying to be helpful.

"But then anyone might come along and see my knickers," she said.

"I'm telling Mum you said knickers!" Ron gasped, still trying to get over the branch.

"What's wrong with that?" Harry said, confused.

"Oh! You're just trying to see them! Mum said there would be boys like you, who only want to see my knickers!"

Harry looked at Luna, confused.

"It's that privacy that Mum's gone on about. I better go talk to her." She squatted down on the branch she was standing on, took hold of it, dropped, so she was dangling about three feet off the ground, and let go. She ran after Ginny.

"Girls!" said Ron, who somehow ended up draped over the branch at his waist, with both his head and feet hanging down. He was holding on to the branch with his hands. There was more of him over the branch on his chest side, so if his hands weren't holding him still, he probably would have continued over, and fallen on his head.

"Harry, can you give me a hand, please?"

- - -

"He wasn't trying to see them, you know."

"Then why did he want me to climb the tree?"

"Because we were climbing the tree, and he was having fun, so he wanted to share the fun. He's like that. He didn't grow up with anything to share or anyone to share it with. He's really nice."

"Well if he's so nice, why don't you marry him!"

"I will."

"Well, I'm going to marry Harry Potter!"

Luna suppressed a laugh. She had heard this before. "What happens if he's already married?"

"He can't be married. He's only eight."

"Oh, that's right. We won't make you climb the tree. We'll play something else."

- - -

Harry convinced Ron not to tell on Ginny. Luna convinced Ginny to play with them again. Later they played tag, and the twins joined in, which eventually ended the game after one of the twins was tagged and then they both acted like they were "it" and both Ginny and Harry were tagged "it" and the twins wouldn't tell them who was really "it".

Harry and Luna went home tired after a fun day.

That night Luna climbed into Harry's bed. Larry had moved his office to the newly expanded room downstairs, and Harry was moved into his own bedroom. They would sometimes get in bed with each other to talk before going back to their own bed.

"Harry, can rats be magical?"

"I don't know. I suppose. Mail owls are magical. The Centaurs are magical. Wackspurts are magical. I suppose rats can be, too. Why?"

"Percy's rat had a lot of magic around it, that reminded me of your magic, sort of. It had a bunch of animal magic."

"Well, it is an animal."

"But animals don't have animal magic. Owls have knowledge magic. They need it to find who they're delivering the mail to. Kneazles have communication magic, so they can tell who's trustworthy and who isn't. Mum showed me a Whomping Willow last year in France. It had animal magic so it could move. Why would a rat have animal magic?"

"I don't know. We should ask your Mum, she's a spell-crafter. She knows all about magic."

Luna nodded. They kissed, and told each other their love, and went to sleep in their own beds.

- - -

"This isn't going to work unless we know exactly which way is which on this map. I asked Daddy, and he doesn't have a compass."

"In school I read a way to do it without a compass. You put a stick in the ground, and mark where the shadow stops. Wait fifteen minutes, and mark where the shadow is then. Draw a line from the first mark to the second, and you have a line from the west to the east." He looked outside at the pouring rain. "We'll have to figure it out another day."

Luna nodded. "Finding out where your dark lines go is almost more trouble than it's worth."

"We'll do it on a sunny day. But look what I found on the bookshelf." Harry went over to the couch and pulled a dark book from under it. The two children huddled together and held it between them. The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk. They looked at it wide eyed and opened it to the first chapter.

- - -

"Daddy?"

"Yes, pine cone?"

"Can we go to Fortescue's for ice cream?"

"Sorry, snapdragon, but I have to get this written."

- - -

"Daddy, can we go now?"

"It's only been five minutes since you asked. I'm not done."

- - -

"Daddy, are you done yet?"

"No, but that's the seventh time you've interrupted me in the last fifteen minutes."

"I won't bother you again if you take us to get ice cream."

"OUT!"

- - -

"Uncle Larry?"

"What is it!"

"I was thinking, once you're done with that, you can drop it off at the Quibbler while we have ice cream, and you'll get two jobs done at once."

"Yeah, that would work. Now leave me alone so I can get this finished."

- - -

"Are you sure he'll take us?" Luna asked Harry, thinking they should ask her father again.

"We just have to leave him alone for a little while. We'll have to watch, and when he's done with that paper, we'll check if he's ready to go."

- - -

"We promise to sit right here and not move. I promise, Daddy!"

"Me, too."

"Alright, but don't move. Uh, what's that stick doing on the table?"

"That's our sun-stick. We're measuring the shadow. See, here is where it's at now. And when you come back, we'll see where it is then."

Larry scratched his head and shrugged. Kids! He went off for an unexpected visit to the office.

- - -

"Is it far enough?"

"I think so."

"OK, set out the map. Now lean over, a little more. That's good. Hang on while I mark the map."

A short time later, Luna told Harry to sit down. She completed some lines on the already marked map.

"I'm not sure, but I think one is in London somewhere. This one is in Scotland, the Highlands. Here's one in Cumbria. Unless I'm confusing those two lines, then there's one in Strathclyde, and the other is Northumberland. I don't think we'll be able to tell unless we can get near Scotland. I'm pretty sure there's one in Swindon, which isn't too

far from home. There's one near Portsmouth, or maybe even on the Isle of Wight. And the last one is far away to the South East. It's not in England.

"Did you want to see if we can find the one in London?"

Harry thought about it for a moment. "No. We need to plan this. We need. . . ."

"Hello, Harry, little one. Finished your ice cream? Oh, checking out the map? Hmmm, these lines look like they cross Hogwarts. Well, pack up, let's go home."

"Thank you Daddy, for bringing us."

"Yes, thank you Uncle Larry."

"You're welcome kids. Now let's go."

- - -

"Got the wands?"

"Yes. And the invisibility cloak. They hid it way up high."

"I've got the broom. Are you sure you want to go to the Isle of Wight instead of Swindon?"

"I've never seen the sea. I'd like to see it."

"Alright, let's go."

"Hold out my hand and say UP! Hey, it worked. This broom seems like it wants to get going."

"Yes. Oh, wait a minute. DADDY! We're going over to the Weasleys' to play! See you later!"

"Be good. Come back before dinner."

"Ok, let's go."

- - -

It turned out that the line didn't point to the Isle of Wight, or Portsmouth, but an area by the ocean a few miles east of Portsmouth. The exact place it pointed to was a rocky, flat area about a hundred meters from the ocean. They landed out of sight, and walked to where the line disappeared straight down into the rock.

"This doesn't make sense," Luna said. "The line points down, as if whatever it attaches to is buried below us."

"It can't be buried like a pirate's treasure. This is all rock here. Even if we had a shovel, we couldn't get through this."

After a few moments of puzzling, they decided to go over to the cliff and give Harry a better look at the ocean. As they were staring down at the water, Harry suddenly looked up.

"Maybe it's in a cave we can't see from here! Like a pirate cave! Want to fly down along the cliff and check it out?"

They got out of sight again, donned the invisibility cloak, and took off. After a few minutes, they found the cave, and flew right in.

"Lumos!" Luna waved her wand and produced a light. They had been practicing the spells in the first level spell book they found. Some didn't seem to work, no matter what they tried, but some did. They landed in the cave. Luna looked around, and led Harry to a wall.

"This wall is glowing with magic. Seems to be the same color as your blood protection. But it's not a protection. A key? Can you make a key out of blood?"

"I don't think so. Could blood itself be the key? A sacrifice?"

"Oh, yuck, if that's what it takes we'll never get in there."

"How about just a little blood? Could that work?"

Luna squinted at the wall. It didn't help her mage-sight at all. "I don't know. I don't think it would hurt."

Harry looked around and found some broken bottles. Obviously, others knew about the cave, but didn't know about the magic wall. He poked his finger with a sharp piece of glass. Then he put his finger to the wall, and it disappeared while a glowing silver arch appeared. They entered a dark room. Luna looked around.

"Wow! This place is just glowing with magic. The water's magic, the ceiling, that island out there in the lake is really bright with it. That's where the line is pointing. Oh, there's some sort of link over here." She led Harry around the lake. Harry was getting very nervous. The darkness felt like it was pressing in, and his and Luna's lit wands didn't seem to penetrate the gloom like they should.

"Don't touch the water. It's got some sort of magic trigger. I can't tell what it triggers, but I don't want to spring any traps."

"Luna, I'm scared."

She looked at him, concerned. "You don't have to be, you know. There isn't anything to be scared of yet. Triggering something would be cause for alarm, but we haven't done anything like that. Hold my hand. We'll be fine."

Her calm, matter of fact way had relaxed him. He held her hand with his left hand, and the wand and broom in his right.

"Oh, I think I've figured out the ceiling - it's an anti-light spell. I think whoever set it up wanted to frighten people."

"It's working," Harry said with a genuine smile.

"May I have my hand back? There's something here." Harry let go, and she brought her wand and hand to a point that looked as black and empty as the rest of the room. Suddenly Luna was holding a green chain that was moving from the direction of the water to pile up near her feet. A small boat appeared, being pulled by the chain.

"Well, let's get in."

"Is it safe?"

"I think so. Once we're in, I think it will take us to the green island in the middle of the lake."

Harry held Luna's hand as she stepped into the boat. As soon as her second foot was in, the boat started moving. Harry had to jump in.

"I think it only expects one person in. It's not very big. I don't think you could get two grown-ups in this boat. I think that's important."

"You mean that there's something that takes two people out there, and there's only room for one in the boat?"

"I'm guessing, but yes. If this is pirate treasure, the pirate had a really powerful wizard to set all this up. Oh yuck! A body floating in the water!"

Harry was feeling very scared now, and held Luna's hand again, while the boat moved through the darkness towards the green glow.

The boat came to rest at the island. They carefully got out together, and walked to the only interesting thing on the island - a stone column holding up a stone basin filled with a sickly glowing green liquid.

"Ewww. That stuff is just loaded with dark magic. The bowl is surrounded by anti-magic wards for all sorts of magics. And your line points right into the bottom of the bowl."

"Are we supposed to reach in and get it?"

"No, I think one of things the potion is protected against is someone touching it. Ewww, again! That would be really strange if you drank it. It would probably really mess up your insides if you did, as well as whatever the potion does. Do you still have your water bottle?"

"Yes, it's almost finished. Did you want a drink?"

"Sure. I want to finish it and use the bottle. You can share mine on the way home."

"Alright. Here."

Luna finished the little bit of water from the .5 liter bottle. She found she could push the bottle into the potion, and fill it. She took the bottle of potion out and poured it on the ground.

"That's no good. See, it filled up again."

Luna laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"I can see where it's filling from. You can't see it, but there's a tank of this potion on the far side of the lake. When we don't do the right thing, which I think is drink it, the bowl moves more potion over here."

"Too bad we haven't gotten any wards to work. We could ward the island against the potion."

Luna laughed at that, and Harry's spirits rose.

"But it would take way too long to empty the tank with this bottle. It looks like a really big tank. Let me see. . . ."

"Harry, it's warded against all sorts of spell types. More than I've ever heard of. But I don't think whoever did this thought of household spells."

"I don't think a Scourgify will do it, even if I could cast it."

"No, that's probably too powerful. Try something simpler."

"Alright. Fonticulus!"

The potion followed Harry's wand motion and arched out of the bowl, and broke up into many little streams, perfect for watering plants. Luna cast it too, and the potion started going down faster. But then it started filling up. Luna and Harry cast the spell again, and the basin was emptying faster than it was filling. It was almost pretty with the glowing green liquid arching through the air.

They saw the opening where the potion was magically coming from the unseen storage tank. Harry cast the spell a third time, intercepting the liquid before it joined the rest of the potion in the basin. They watched, careful not to get any of the potion on themselves. Suddenly, the bottom of the basin was visible, and lying there was a gold cup. Luna grabbed the cup, and put it in her backpack.

"This is it. This is where your line connects. Uh-oh!"

Harry looked around. Coming up from the water in every direction were pale people. They made not a sound and had no expression on their faces.

"Uh-oh is right. Shall we go?"

"Let's."

"UP!" They quickly flew over the zombies, and Harry followed Luna's directions towards the exit. As they landed on the beach, they noticed more zombies starting to come up out of the water near them. Harry took the piece of glass that he had used before from his pocket, and cut himself again. This time it was rather serious, but the blood still worked, and they passed through the arch well before any of the slow moving zombies reached them. They stopped at the edge of the cave long enough to pull the invisibility cloak around themselves, and they headed home.

- - -

Somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains a thing that was less than a ghost felt something new. It had been slowly gaining a sense of self, along with an anger against its current situation. It knew at some level that what it was wasn't what it was supposed to be, and someone

caused it to happen. But now it had a new sensation -- fear. The spirit of Lord Voldemort did not rest easy.

It hadn't progressed to the point of having real memories. When it finally reached that point, it would try in vain to remember the cause of its fear. And being unable to remember only increased its fear.

Chapter 5 Holidays

Harry and Luna came home to a pair of very angry adults. Molly Weasley had called to make sure it was OK with the Lovegoods to take the kids to Diagon Alley that Friday, as her older children needed to get their school supplies. When Larry asked how the kids were doing, he found out that something was amiss. By the time he had discovered that the wands, broom, and invisibility cloak were missing, his wife had finished whatever she was working on and had called home, which was soon followed by her return home.

They weren't trying to hide what they did, once they were caught. It was just that after they said they went on a treasure hunt, Selene didn't wait for any further explanation. Harry and Luna received a long, angry lecture, as well as loss of wand privileges for an indefinite time. They would have school work instead of playtime for the next week, early bedtimes, and be sent to their rooms without lunch or supper. The last was imposed by Larry, as Selene had done most of the talking up to that point.

The lecture was interrupted when Selene noticed Harry's cut hand. They paused as she got it cleaned up and cast a healing charm. It became a part of the lecture, a vivid example of how much danger they were in -- what would have happened if the cut had been bigger, or in a part of the body where he could have lost a lot of blood? Would they have been able to get to help in time?

As they were going up to their rooms, Harry heard Aunt Selene start to yell at Uncle Larry for being irresponsible and negligent. She was a lot louder with him than she had been with them.

He sat in his room and thought. It was so different! Yes, Selene and Larry had been angry, but they didn't yell. And they didn't hit. When he saw them so angry, he had felt his stomach tighten, certain a beating was coming. He still wasn't sure that he wouldn't get one, but he reflected that this was a time when he really had done something very wrong.

He sat in the room and waited. Going without food was something he had been used to at the Dursleys, but it had been several months

now since he had missed a meal. He wondered if that would make it easier or harder.

They didn't get any lunch, but that could be because they got back so late. When supper came around they were called down for food. Aunt Selene told them that they didn't withhold food as punishment, but they were not to expect any treats. They were informed that they would have bread and water for dinner. Harry supposed that the adults would get whatever he was smelling. The table was already set with plates and bowls. Selene brought in a plate of fresh rolls, followed by a pot of soup. As she poured it into the bowls she explained with a smile that it was mostly water, and the rolls were just bread. The soup was home made and tasted pretty good, and the hot, fresh rolls were delicious. The kids ate the rolls and soup heartily.

They did have to go to bed after cleaning up the dishes. After getting ready for bed, Harry sat on Luna's bed brushing her hair. Selene stopped by to make sure they weren't playing, but when she saw what was going on, she told them to finish up quick and get to their own beds.

Harry and Luna whispered while he did her hair.

"I'm sorry it turned out the way it did, Harry."

"Yeah, we probably shouldn't have done it. It was a pretty frightening adventure, though."

"I didn't think we were in too much danger. It could have been a lot worse. If I were hiding a treasure, I certainly wouldn't have made all the traps magical."

"Yeah, but very few people can see magic the way you do. Had it just been me in there, I wouldn't have found the inner cave, or the boat, or figured what to do with the potion. So it would have stopped me."

"I guess we were just lucky."

"Let's not do that again for a while. I wonder what the cup is?"

"We should ask Mum."

"We should, but not right now. If we told her that there were zombies, poison potions, and other magical traps she'd really get upset. Let's just let her calm down for awhile before we show it to her."

- - -

Harry got up early as usual and went downstairs to help make breakfast. As he passed the parlor he noticed that there were sheets on the couch. He helped Selene make breakfast. He asked about the couch while they worked.

"I was pretty upset with my husband yesterday, Harry. While you deserve most of the blame for your actions, he gets some, too, as he was in charge."

"So his punishment was sleeping on the couch?"

"Yes. Or no. Not really punishment. When married people have fights, sometimes we have to get away from each other and calm down. One thing you have to be very careful of when you fight with someone you love is making sure you don't hurt them in anger. It's so easy to do -- to say mean words when you're angry. You don't mean them, and you apologize when you calm down, and you might even get forgiven, but it's too late. When you fight with someone you love you have to remember not to make it worse. And that's something very hard to remember when you want to just slap someone silly.

"That's something else to avoid. When you get angry you want to lash out and cause the other person pain. But you have to avoid that, Harry. I'm sure there were times you wished you could hurt your relatives back for hurting you. But when someone you love is making you feel that way, you must not give in to that urge. You may hurt them only a little and find that you've hurt your relationship a whole lot. No amount of being sorry can undo what you've done."

Harry tried to take this all in. He wasn't sure what this had to do with the sheets on the couch, but it sounded like good advice. He'd have

to watch out if he and Luna got in a fight. Of course they didn't fight, but someday maybe they would and he'd need to know this.

- - -

On Friday Rosamond Croaker watched them, since the Weasleys were going to Diagon Alley, and Harry and Luna were still being punished. Ginny and Ron talked a lot about all the things they saw. Harry and Luna accepted the fact that they missed something that may have been fun, but as Luna said, it doesn't do any good to be sad now.

- - -

Harry's new birthday came. They had Ron and Ginny over during the day. They played together more often since the older Weasleys were away at school. After the kids "treasure hunt," Luna's parents always made sure that they were really playing with the Weasleys when they said they were.

- - -

Uncle Ollie came over for dinner on his birthday. He gave Harry a wand cleaning kit -- it contained a little linseed oil and a cloth in a little carrying case. He was curious about how their magical instruction was progressing. When he was told about the kids' adventure and loss of their wand privileges Ollivander became quite concerned and explained the secrecy law to the children. They told him that they knew about it and insisted that they weren't observed when they were flying, or putting on or taking off the invisibility cloak, and the only time they used their wands was in a cave where no one could see them. When asked, they explained that the only spells they had cast were Lumos and Fonticulus, and Nox to turn their wands off.

Ollivander again stressed how important the secrecy laws were. Then he dropped the subject. Inside he was proud of the children's accomplishments.

Luna got Harry a deck of exploding snap cards. Selene and Larry bought him some new clothes, and a couple of books: Voyages with

Vampires by Gilderoy Lockhart, and Treasure Island by Robert Lewis Stevenson. Over the next few weeks he read them both. Treasure Island he thought was good. The other book had a lot of boring sections where the author described in dull detail either what he was wearing, or how brave he was. Harry thought that Jim Hawkins was brave, but he never went on about it. Both Harry and Luna thought that the section of Lockhart's book on Zombies didn't describe the creatures they had run into.

They still hadn't told Selene about the cup. They weren't sure how.

- - -

Harry received several letters from Remus Lupin. In them, Remus talked about his parents and some about his grandparents, all of whom died around the time of the war against You-Know-Who. He always asked what Harry was doing and how his new family was. Harry and Luna would be assigned to each write a letter back. Remus also wrote about house hunting and promised to have the Lovegoods over once he was settled.

Harry liked learning about his parents. He thought it strange that about two thirds of the stories Remus wrote about them happened while they were at Hogwarts, until he realized that Remus knew them for longer in Hogwarts than they had been alive once they left the school.

- - -

The wands stayed locked up until almost Halloween. One Saturday while painting, a bottle of paint spilled. Selene brought out their wands and taught them the Abstergo Tertilis spell to get stains out of the carpet. Then she put the wands away again.

- - -

Ron and Ginny were jealous when they found out that Luna and Harry had wands. Ron, at least (and Ginny to herself) became much less interested when they found out that Harry and Luna were only allowed to use them to clean up.

The twins got better at playing with the other kids. For example, if they tried both pretending to be "it" during a game of tag the other kids would stop playing with them. They found it was more boring to not play at all than to play by the rules.

Ron eventually found Harry's problem. The reason, Ron figured, that Harry liked doing housework was because he didn't know about Quidditch. To Ron's mind, if he could get Harry interested in Quidditch, he'd forget about wanting to do housework. One day after lunch, Ron talked to Harry in great detail about the game, the positions, the plays, the fouls, and his favorite team, the Chudley Cannons. He was concentrating on it so much that he hadn't even noticed that Harry and he had washed the lunch dishes until they were done. Harry smiled at Mrs. Weasley's "Thank you."

He then turned to Ron and said, "Wasn't that a lot more fun when you do them with someone?"

Ron almost despaired of curing his new friend. He'd just have to try something else.

- - -

"Yes, sir, may I help you?"

Remus looked at the clerk and thought he looked familiar from his time at Hogwarts. Remus reflected that there were worse jobs than working at a grocers. "Yes, I've just moved and I'd like to get my fireplace connected to the Floo network."

"Then you've come to the right department. Do you have your authorization form filled out? How about the disconnect request? No previous connection? I see. Do you have a Floo Security Ward Selection form? And this is new, the privacy statement, you need to sign here to show that we gave it to you, whether you read it or not is up to you. And this is another new one, well, relatively new, it's been around almost four years. It's a disclaimer that any unauthorized use of the Floo is your responsibility and not that of the Ministry. And here's the Permission to Connect Fireplace form, we need that

signed along with the connection fee and the rest before we can enter your house. Are you in a Muggle neighborhood? Then you'll need this Temporary Secure Apparition Point form filled out by an Auror so the workmen can get to your house without being seen. You'll have to arrange with the Aurors to get that filled out. Yes I believe there is a fee for that service, but you'll have to talk to them about the amount. Thank you. Have a nice day."

Remus walked away from the window. He had thought long and hard about the name for his floo connection. He had rejected Wolf's Den, Moony's Place, and Marauders' End. The first two because he felt they advertised his condition. The last because he thought there might still be some people out there who held a grudge. Might? He was pretty sure of it. As long as they didn't know who the Marauders were, he was safe. But when he came down to the Ministry, he thought the hardest thing he'd have to do to get connected would be to pick the name. He looked at the pile of parchments he was holding. No, it was not the hardest thing he would have to do. He sighed and sitting at a convenient desk picked up a quill.

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, chief Warlock, etc, sat at a table in the Three Broomsticks waiting for his lunch companion to show up. Algie Croaker stepped into the restaurant, spotted Dumbledore, and came over to him.

"Albus! To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Algie! Do sit, please. I have a proposition for you."

"Sorry, Albus. I'm already married."

Dumbledore looked confused for a moment then moved on. "I was wondering if you might be available to become a professor?"

"Me? What would you want me to teach? And why are you asking now? Did something happen to one of the teachers?"

"No, nothing happened. And I wouldn't need you until next year. What happened is Professor Marsland's brother-in-law in the New World has started a security business, and Professor Marsland has resigned come the end of the term to join him. This is particularly annoying as I've had to replace the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor every year, and Professor Marsland said he would be around for several years. I'm just trying to get a jump on the whole process. The way it usually works is the instructor informs me around finals time that he's leaving, or dying of something, or, in the case of old Professor Mann, was killed during summer break, and I'm left scrambling, looking for a replacement at the last minute.

"At least this time I've got a bit of leeway, so I thought I'd get the hiring done as soon as possible."

"To be honest, Albus, I don't think I'd mind the teaching. But I couldn't live at the castle. I've been married over sixty-five years, and I don't think I'd like to sleep away from my wife. I'm sure she wouldn't want to move to the castle."

"You wouldn't have to stay every night. Maybe one night a week to do late night hall monitoring."

"I thought that's what the ghosts were for."

"I've tried, but they're so nostalgic about life that they don't want to really interfere with the adolescents' nocturnal rendezvousess. Even the bloody Bloody Baron won't turn in non-Slytherin students."

He continued in a hoarse whisper, "Let them live a little, Headmaster. They're only alive once."

In his own voice he muttered, "Stupid ghosts."

Coaker could barely keep a straight face, because he could see that the Hogwarts' headmaster was being serious. "Well, I'll talk it over with Rosamond. I can't promise you anything, but we'll consider it."

"I can't ask more than that.

"Meanwhile, how's your great-grand nephew, Neville. I bet he's just causing lots of problems with accidental magic."

"No, actually, there has been almost no accidental magic at all. For a long time we were worried that he might be a squib. He isn't, but he may never be a great wizard, either."

"Nonsense! The son of Alice and Frank, a squib? Don't be ridiculous."

"Oh, come on, Albus. Surely you have a better memory than that! Alice was only a moderately or even weak witch. Great at potions. If Evans hadn't been in the same year, she would have been top student. And Frank -- I love him like a son, but if we hadn't been at war, he would never have made it in the Auror program. He was a fantastic Beater and would have gone pro if his sense of duty had been any less. But in those skirmishes he survived he did it by dodging and punching out the Death Eaters; the man never mastered a shield charm. Poor spell casting, excellent right hook; that was Frank."

"So, if Neville's talents lie elsewhere, well, we'll just have to see. We'll love him no matter what."

"Yes, we will see." As they ordered lunch, Dumbledore reflected. 'The power he knows not!' he thought. 'Reflexes? Boxing? That couldn't be right.' He could hardly wait until he had the boy, then he would train him properly for a confrontation with Evil!

- - -

"Whatcha doing, Luna?"

"It's the latest issue of the Quibbler. I'm trying to do the Rune Puzzle."

"How does that work?"

"Like many old writings, magical runes can mean more than one thing. If you turn them, they can become different runes altogether, like those are the same lines, just spun. There's no guarantee in the puzzle that the runes are the right side up. And the runes not only

mean words, they can mean sounds, too. So you have to try to figure out which ones need to go together to be the sound of a word, and which ones might need to be turned to be the right word.

"So, here's the Rune dictionary, and that's a translation dictionary for the ancient Viking language. And they usually turn out to be rhymes. And there's the English clue, Fun to do with your pet. So, we put all those clues together, and keep trying things until we get something that might be fun to do with your pet."

"That's hard."

"But anything worth doing is hard."

"Is the puzzle worth doing?"

"It's fun, and it helps me with learning Runes. Mum's been teaching me forever. You can join, too, you know. She just lets you read when she's teaching me."

"OK, I'll ask her. Can I help you?"

"Yes. If I turn this one upside down, what does it mean?"

Harry took the Rune dictionary and started turning pages, trying to figure out how the symbols were arranged.

- - -

"Harry! Letter from Uncle Remus!"

"Be right there, Aunt Selene."

"Never mind, Harry. It's for us, not you. Larry, Remus says he's moved to a bigger place and is inviting us for dinner. This Saturday all right with you? And he wants you to devote your paper to a crusade against the government; advocating violent revolution against the bureaucrats who have to share a brain cell and forget to bring it to work. I wonder what sort of problem he ran into?"

- - -

"This is very nice, Remus. You're moving up in the world."

"Well, after you re-united me with Harry, I realized my old place wasn't big enough to fit all of us in for dinner like this. I also thought, if you approve, I could borrow the kids for some weekends. I've been here for over a year, and I haven't gone to any of the sights around here? There's a castle at Tattershall, less than fifteen miles from here, and an old abby in Boston, and I've only been down to the Channel twice. There's a lot around here that I would enjoy sharing with the kids. You're welcome, too, by the way."

Selene said, "Thank you Remus. I'm sure that would be fun."

Larry put his two knuts in. "And we're not too far from Nottingham, are we? I've always had this thing for Robin Hood, you know. And I'm sure I could get a lot of stories for the paper. These old places must be awash in history: ghosts, secret passages, terrible murders! The possibilities are endless."

"How is the paper doing, Larry?"

"It's doing well. Well, I think we lost some readers when Mrs. Seaford died a few months ago. The new 'Advice to the Love Lorn' columnist just doesn't connect with the readers."

"What did she die from?"

"Old age. The old dear was over a hundred and eighty."

"Uncle Remus?"

"Yes, Luna."

"Are you an animagus?"

"Uh, no. No, I'm not. Why do you ask?"

"Because Mum says that Harry might be an animagus because he's got kelvar-magic, and you do too."

"Kelvar?" Remus asked Selene.

"Ancient word for animals. She has mage-sight."

"Yours is darker, so maybe it's not like Harry's. But we saw a rat with animal magic, but we can't figure out why. Rats can't be animagi, can they?"

"No, I've never heard of a rat that can change into another animal. Where did you see this rat?"

"Percy Weasley's pet, Scabbers."

"The rat's at Hogwarts now. And so is Scabbers."

"Harry!" Selene scolded.

"Well, he's not very friendly," Harry muttered.

"But this rat has magic like an animagus?"

"Like Harry."

"I wouldn't want to be a rat-animagus. That would be even worse than a snake-animagus."

"You know, Harry, your father was an animagus."

"He was?"

"Yes. His form was a stag. . . ."

- - -

"Chief Inspector Bones, it's good of you to see me."

"Well, the sergeant said that you had quite a tale to tell, Mr. Lupin, and he wasn't sure what to do about it."

"I don't know what to do about it either. You see, I have no proof. But if what I suspect is true, we have a murderer loose, and an innocent man in Azkaban. I'm hoping you can help, to at least put my mind at rest."

"Why don't you tell the story from the beginning?"

- - -

"Seasons greeting! How may I help you? Oh! You're Madam Bones! I recognize you from your pictures. Oh, no! Fred! George! What have you done NOW?"

"Mrs. Weasley, please calm down. We're not here about anything your children have done. Although it might be a good idea to start a file on this Fred and George, Shack."

The tall, bald, black Auror beside her said, "Yes, Chief," with a straight expression. He watched Mrs. Weasley's eyes get bigger, then broke out in a big smile.

"This is Auror Kinglsey Shacklebolt." Greetings were quickly exchanged, and the ministry people were invited in.

"We're doing a little investigation and would like to talk to your son, Percy."

"Percy? He's never done a thing wrong. . . ."

"We're not investigating Percy. But we hope he has some information that can shed some light on another crime. If we may talk to him?"

The boy was soon in the kitchen. The rest of the Weasley children gathered near the door of the kitchen (except Bill, who "didn't care" and was several feet away, standing very quiet with an ear aiming at the doorway).

"Percy," Madam Bones said, "Do you have a pet rat?"

Before Percy could even answer, the rat in question scampered out of his pocket, and leaped for the floor.

"Accio rat!" Kingsley yelled. The rat flew to his hand. He caught it, and it bit him. He grabbed its scruff to avoid any further bites.

"Scabbers! What are you doing with my rat?"

What they did was hold him while they learned the history of the rat. Kingsley cast a spell on the creature, which must have shown what he wanted, because he nodded to the Chief Inspector. She conjured a cage, and the rat was soon secured in it.

"What is all this about, Madam Bones?"

"We think that this isn't a rat, Mrs. Weasley, but an animagus, who might also be a murderer. We will take him back to headquarters, turn him back to a human, and see who we have caught. Mr. Weasley, we're sorry you are losing your rat, but if it's not really a rat, you shouldn't have it as a pet, should you?"

Percy gave a quiet "No." He was rather shook up by the whole event.

"Have a good night. Oh, is Arthur around?"

"No, he should be here any moment. . . ."

"I'm sorry I missed him. Tell him I said hello, and you and your whole family have a great day tomorrow."

"Thank you. Will you tell us what you find?"

"Rest assured. However, if it's what we think, you'll probably read about it in the paper before we can get the news to you."

- - -

The food was slid through the slot in the door. While he wouldn't say he felt good, he definitely didn't feel the horror of the Dementors. Of course, they weren't around at meal times; the elves who worked here couldn't be around the Dementors. But there hadn't been any earlier in the day, either. There was something about today, if only he could remember it. The dinner elf has said something. He got off the mattress and went over to the food. There was a glimmer of a thought that no one should eat this stuff, but he was too hungry for pride. Pride! Ha. Who has pride left after any time in here? At least he had his sanity; which was more than could be said for a lot of the prisoners he could hear.

There was a noise that he hadn't heard in a long time. A clank of metal on metal. It was the door apparently being unlocked. Now the door was opening. He looked up -- and a figure was moving towards him.

"Sirius! Sirius, you're free! They arrested Pettigrew. They found him! Come on, old friend. Let's get you out."

Remus helped the former prisoner up. Sirius looked dazed and didn't say anything. Remus just kept talking, leading him down the various corridors, following their prison guides. He helped him get changed into some clothes he brought, and put a heavy coat around him. He gave Sirius a large piece of chocolate and took him out of the prison. He walked his friend to the pier and got him into the boat that was waiting. The sun shone brightly, though it was a cold day.

Sirius looked around. His voice was harsh from disuse. "I'm free?" Remus nodded.

"Thank you, Moony!" Sirius Black gave Remus Lupin a hug, and broke down crying.

They got to the Auror's station at the mainland end of the boat ride. After very little paperwork (Remus had started perspiring when he saw the Auror approach with a clipboard) it was over. They were allowed to use the fireplace that was kept behind a very secure door.

Remus threw some floo powder into the fire, and got in with Sirius, as his friend was still having problems staying on his feet. "Lupin's Lair!" he called, and away they spun.

Remus managed to keep them both on their feet as they exited. Sirius looked around the unfamiliar room.

"Merry Christmas, Padfoot," Remus said, helping Sirius to the couch so he could continue to stare at the Christmas tree.

- - -

The Daily Prophet had several stories on the front page of the December 25, 1988 issue:

Sirius Black Innocent! Peter Pettigrew found alive!

Supposed victim real murderer!

Six Years in Azkaban! Will Sirius Black ever be sane again?

Leading expert on the effects of Dementors says "NO"

Minister Fudge says "A great day for justice"

Proof our criminal justice system works

Where's Harry Potter?

Rumors persist that Boy-Who-Lived is dead

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, discoverer of the 11 uses for dragons' blood (really, anyone who's fought one already knew that the stains never come out) sat down in Cornelius Fudge's office.

"Minister."

"Headmaster."

"I must protest this blatant breach of privacy. Hasn't the boy done enough for the Wizarding world? Can't we give him a few years peace, at least until he re-joins us when he comes to school?"

"It's these confounded rumors. You fight rumors with facts, and I need facts."

"Minister."

"Ah, Mrs. Arsnal. Please come in. Do you know the head of the records department, Dumbledore?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Gloria, isn't it? You were a first year when I was Head Boy, if I recall."

"That's right, Headmaster."

"Please, call me Albus."

"Enough! You can go do lunch or something on your own time. Did you bring the folder?"

"Here it is."

"Minister, I protest. . . ."

"And you have since I owled you. Half the time you ignore my owls, but this one brings you down here? Let's get this over with!"

"Hmmm, born, parents, accidental magic, orphaned. THAT'S IT? Where's the rest of it?"

Mrs. Arsnal held out her hand. "Let me see that please, Minister. Yes, see here? There was supposed to be a lock of hair from the baby placed here, and a standard set of spells that would have made the folder automatically updating. If the parents don't send the hair in by the second birthday the folder is supposed to warn us and we make a call on the family. This folder was sealed before that date, canceling the warning."

"So, for all we know, the boy might be dead?"

"Unfortunately, Minister, you are correct," Mrs. Arsnal said.

"What is that, Mrs. Arsnal?"

"Oh, this is the list of people who have tried to access the folder since it was sealed."

Dumbledore held his hand out. "May I see that? Hmmm, it looks like a good thing we sealed the records. Seems the Death Eaters wanted to know where he was, too."

"Let me see that. MacNair wasn't a Death Eater, and these other two were exonerated."

"What about this Lovegood person?"

Mrs. Arsnal brightened up. "Mrs. Lovegood? She works for the Department of Mysteries. She was filing papers around this time, adopting a relative, if I recall correctly."

"Well, I want to know what she's doing with this folder. Wilson!"

"That's Winston, sir. Yes?"

"Get," he glanced at the paper, "Selene Lovegood in here right away. She's in the Department of Mysteries."

"Yes sir."

A short time later, the long-haired blond knocked on the office door.

"You wanted to see me, Minister?"

"Yes. I want to know what you were doing looking at the Harry Potter folder."

"What? Oh, uh, yes. It's silly, really. My daughter, who's about a year younger than Potter, had decided to marry him. So I thought maybe I could get the two together. But I found you couldn't get into the folder. That's it."

Dumbledore smiled. He wasn't actively probing anyone -- you never knew who might detect an unwarranted use of Legilimency -- but what he could pick up from the surface was that she was telling the truth. Seeing the Minister's annoyance, he decided to have some fun.

"And does she still want to marry Harry Potter?"

"No. She's decided to marry her distant cousin who we're fostering. But I think her friend Ginny Weasley wants to."

"Ah, yes, Arthur and Molly's youngest."

"Will all you people get out of my office! I have work to do!"

The Headmaster smiled benevolently. That last bit had worked perfectly. He had stopped the Minister's investigation and annoyed him at the same time. He would sleep soundly tonight.

- - -

"Wake up. Come on."

"Huh? What?"

"What's going on dear?"

"Go back to sleep, Aunt Selene. I just need Uncle Larry for a few minutes."

"Harry, do you know what time it is?"

"Yes, and you said to get you up now."

"Oh, right. Sorry, couldn't remember as I was waking up."

"What's going on?"

"Just a project Harry and I have going. Rest a few minutes. You don't have to be up now."

"All right."

The two men of the house went downstairs.

"How far did you get, Harry?"

"I'm almost done. I thought you said you'd be down to help?" All this had come about from something Larry had said. He should have done more.

"Sorry. Well, I'm here now. That's a lot of food."

"Yes, and it's almost ready. Get the trays."

Larry transformed a couple of trays to have short legs. He started putting silverware, glasses, and napkins on them. Harry brought plates of food over from the stove.

"Ready. You sure you can carry all that? Then let's go, Harry."

They went their separate ways at the top of the stairs, Larry going to his bedroom, and Harry going to Luna's. "Lights," he said, activating the magic candles. Luna looked up sleepily from the bed to see Harry carrying a tray of food.

"Happy Valentine's day, Luna."

- - -

"Mr. Padfoot, Mr. Moony wants to express his concern about you staying so long in that gloomy place. I wish you'd spend more time here; at least until you look healthier. That museum to the dark arts your family called home isn't helping your emotional state."

"Mr. Moony should get his passport stamped before he treads on my emotional state. Remus, I have to do this. I feel that I have to purge that part of my life before I start again."

"But with that portrait screaming all the time, and Kreacher undoing half of what you try to get done, it will take years to get it in order. Don't wait that long. Let me introduce you to the Lovegoods. They're good people, and I promise you a surprise when you meet them."

"Oh, very well. I can at least get the dining room and kitchen cleaned up for guests."

"You won't regret this, Padfoot."

- - -

"Sirius."

"Cissy! Welcome to my humble house. And this must be Draco! When I last saw you, you weren't even walking."

"WHO SULLIES THE ANCIENT AND NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK!"

"Damn," Sirius muttered under his breath. "It's my cousin Narcissa, Mother." He cast a silencing charm over the picture and turned to his three guests. "Sorry -- my mother's painting. All she does is scream."

"You were a bit of a disappointment to her when you ran away. She was happy when you killed those Muggles. Now I'm sure she'd be disappointed again since it really wasn't you."

"So sorry that I'm not a murderer disappointed her. Not that it bothers me to disappoint her. She's dead, and just a screeching picture of her is all that's left. For all her boasts and hatreds, she wasn't a very happy person."

"But enough of her. Can I get you something? Some tea and how about some biscuits, Draco?"

"May I, Mother?"

"Yes, do you mind if I look around the old place a bit?"

"No, go right ahead. Just don't touch anything. Some of it is pretty nasty stuff they leave around."

"I can take care of myself cousin. Come, Dobby."

"Kreacher."

"Yes, foolish Master. What does hateful son want Kreacher to do?"

"Watch Narcissa and her elf. Make sure they don't take anything."

"Kreacher will do that."

Draco watched the elf disappear with wide eyes. "Why do you let him get away with talking to you like that. If any of our house elves spoke like that, we'd punish them."

"What? Oh, Kreacher. I don't know that punishing him will make him like me any better, and it's not something I'd enjoy. Well, come on, cousin, let's get those biscuits."

"So, you really didn't kill all those Muggles. Mother and Father used to say that they misjudged you. Now they just don't talk about you."

"Tell me, Draco. What do you think of Muggles?"

"They're vermin that shouldn't be allowed to run around. And definitely shouldn't be allowed to breed with witches and wizards."

"I can't tell for sure, but I would bet that your father has a lot of money invested in the Muggle world, in Muggle companies. And the food you eat is grown by Muggles, and the clothes you wear, if it wasn't made by Muggles, the cloth it was made of probably was. And the fiber they made the cloth from was either grown or raised by Muggles. The thing is, Draco, there aren't enough wizards to supply all the things we use. Think about that. They don't eat our food or use our cloth."

Draco stared at Sirius for a moment. "I never thought of that. . . ."

"Well, here's your biscuits and tea. Ah, Cissy. Here's your tea."

"You set your elf to watch us. But no matter, I didn't come to steal anything. But you know he doesn't like you?"

"Really? I would have said he hates me. Makes him a nuisance a lot of the time."

"Interested in selling him? He'd like to work for me. He kept telling me while we looked around."

"Despite everything, it's useful having an elf around. I don't know. Do you want to trade?"

Narcissa looked at her elf. "I suppose. This one is useful for carrying things but has to spend a lot of time punishing himself. I'm not sure you're getting much better than what you have."

"Can you cook?" Sirius asked Narcissa's elf.

"Yes, Master Black. Dobby can cook well. And clean and shop and. . . ."

"Do you want to work for me?"

Dobby looked at him in confusion. He mouthed the word "want" a couple of times. Before he could answer Narcissa interrupted.

"What does that have to do with anything? Do you want to trade or not?"

He glanced at Dobby, who was nodding his head.

"Yes. Let's trade. I think you'll get better work out of Kreacher than I did, and maybe I'll get better work out of Dobby."

They performed the ritual and soon the house elves had new masters. Sirius sent his new elf to clean the doxies out of the parlor curtains and to wait for him up there. Dobby went with a smile.

"Well, it was nice seeing you again. Don't be a stranger, Narcissa."

"Oh, Sirius, there was something I was wondering about. Now that you're out, will you be taking guardianship of your godson?"

"Harry Potter? I can't find him. I don't suppose you know where he is?"

"No, haven't the faintest. Do you think the rumors of his death are true?"

"I didn't until that recent interview with the headmistress of Beauxbatons."

"I read that. I don't remember anything in particular. . . ."

"When she was asked about Harry Potter possibly going to her school, she said she didn't think so. If it was just rumors, she would have said something about how great an education they could give him, or how welcoming they would be, or something like that. Even if she knew he was going to Hogwarts, she probably would have said something like that to promote her own school. No, I'm guessing she knows something, and it isn't good."

Narcissa looked at him in surprise. "You would have made a good Slytherin, Sirius. Come, Draco, Kreacher. Good bye Sirius."

Sirius went up to the parlor to see cleaned curtains on the windows.

"Dobby has cleaned out the doxies, Master Blackest."

Sirius shook his head. Elves and their names for people. "How about you call me Sirius, Dobby? Meanwhile, I know you can't betray your former mistress, but can you tell me what Kreacher stopped her from taking?"

Dobby pointed to a black locket in a glass case with a dozen other objects.

Sirius readied his wand, opened the door, and quickly grabbed the locket. A Frankenstein monster of a Swiss Army Knife tried to hack him with its scalpel attachment, but he hit it with a stunner.

He examined the locket. It was plain and wouldn't open. He decided to have a curse breaker at Gringotts try to open it.

"That is all she tried to get, Master Seriously."

"Thanks, Dobby. Let's see what we can do about cleaning up this house for some guests that are coming this weekend."

- - -

The fireplace flared green and Remus stepped out into the small downstairs parlor.

"Hello, Sirius. Am I the first?"

"Yes. You're early, as usual. Good thing I know you so well. I made sure I was ready with plenty of time to spare."

Remus snorted, but any further reply was interrupted by the activation of the floo connection again. A little girl with long, blond hair stumbled out of the fireplace shouting "Weeee!" She was followed by a little boy with short, black hair and wire-rimmed glasses, also shouting "Weeee!" The boy and girl looked at each other and laughed, then looked around. They raced over to Remus and hugged him.

"Hello, Uncle Remus!" they said, almost in sync.

A tall, thin woman, obviously the girl's mother, stepped from the fireplace. A moment later a stocky brown-haired wizard followed her.

Sirius was soon introduced to the Lovegoods: Larry, Selene, Luna and Harry. They said their hellos and Sirius noticed Remus smiling.

"Fine! Remus, out with it. You're almost bursting. What is it?"

"Two things really. First, you have Luna to thank for discovering where Pettigrew was hiding."

Sirius looked shocked. Luna just looked at him.

"Seems that Miss Lovegood has mage-sight and spotted that the rat wasn't a normal rat. She just happened to ask me about it, and like a pebble that starts an avalanche, you are free. But she's the pebble."

Luna was about to say something during Remus' speech, but a whispered "Luna!" from her mother quieted her. She sighed a long-suffering sigh. She was Mrs. Lovegood! No matter what her mother said. But she would be good. If she had to.

Sirius expressed his gratitude to the Lovegoods, and Luna in particular.

Remus then continued, "And the second surprise is a prank, worthy of the Marauders. It's a prank that's being pulled on the entire country. Only the five of us and some goblins. . . ."

"And the Croakers," Selene inserted, which caused Remus to raise his eyebrows.

"And Uncle Olli," Luna put in.

"Right, my Uncle Ollivander."

"OK, only eight people know this, and you make the ninth. . . ." He paused for dramatic effect.

"Will you get on with it!"

Yes, Remus thought, an annoyed Sirius was always good for drama. "Sirius, I'd like you to meet your godson, Harry Potter Lovegood. Harry, this is your godfather Sirius Black."

The two eyed each other. The taller broke out in a huge smile. "Harry! Oh, Harry! I haven't seen you since you were a baby!"

- - -

After a longer time getting to know each other than Sirius planned, they eventually sat down to dinner. Dobby served an excellent meal. Neither Harry nor Luna had ever seen a house elf before. After they ate, the children asked to be excused.

"Yes, but don't go upstairs. I haven't cleaned up there."

After they left the dining room, Sirius called for Dobby. "Make sure they don't go upstairs." He turned to the other guests. "There are just too many dark objects in this house. I don't believe they were just lying around when I was a child, but I don't remember. Anyway, the ground floor is clean, and they really can't get into any trouble, except for the portrait."

That led to a discussion about his mother's picture and his inability to do anything with it.

- - -

"This way, Harry."

"We're not going out the front door are we?"

"No, I'm following another of those black lines connected to your curse damage."

"Luna, if I have black magic from the curse, does that mean I'm evil?"

"I don't think so. It could mean you're dangerous, I think. Here we are, behind that curtain. Oh, there's a silencing charm on this side of the curtain. I wonder why?"

They knew all about silencing charms. Sometimes Selene and Larry would put one up around the table, and get out what they called the "check book" and talk without being heard. Sometimes the children

had noticed a silencing charm on the master bedroom door, which didn't make any sense. You couldn't hear anyone talking in there when the door was closed.

"It's not a trigger, is it?" Harry asked.

Luna seemed to squint and look carefully, and said, "No, the spell doesn't seem to be connected to anything. Let's pull back the curtain and see." Luna stepped forward and drew back the old curtain, revealing a painting of an old woman. The painting moved, just like the wizarding newspaper pictures and the ones in Luna's books. It seemed to be saying something, but Harry couldn't hear any sound. He moved closer, then heard it.

"...you brats, and what are you doing in the ancient and noble house of Black!"

"Oh, hullo. I'm Luna and this is Harry. Who are you?"

"I am Walburga Black. This is my house."

"You're a painting."

"Harry, don't be rude. It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Black. You have a lovely house."

She seemed to soften for a moment. "Thank you." Then, whatever changed went away. "What are you doing here?"

"We're on a treasure hunt. I think there's a treasure hidden behind you in the wall."

"How do you know that? No one knows that but me!"

"I guess Luna knows it, too."

"How did you find out?"

Luna shrugged. "Magic."

"You are a full-blooded witch? What is your name?"

"I told you: Luna."

"No, your last name."

"Oh, Lovegood."

"Lovegood? I don't remember any important Lovegoods. What was your mother's name before she got married?"

"Ollivander."

"AH! A worthy and ancient family and very good wand makers. But what are you doing in my house?"

"Uncle Sirius invited us to dinner. The grown ups are still talking, so we decided to look around. Now, can you please let us get at the treasure."

"Robbers! That's what you are. You're thieves! You're sneaking little, dirty, foul, traitorous," The list of insults kept getting louder, and naughtier.

At first Luna and Harry grasped the sides of the painting and tried to move it, but it didn't budge. The painting was screaming things now. Luna stepped back and pulled the wide-eyed Harry with her.

"I never heard of half those words," he whispered.

"Me neither. But that doesn't get us past the painting. Harry, go to the parlor. There was a wand on the end table. I think it was Sirius', but I'm not sure."

"What are you going to do?"

"Do you remember when Mum let us have our wands back the first time?"

"Oh, yes. Do you think it will work?"

"I don't know. It might."

Harry went to the parlor and picked up the wand. Dobby appeared.

"You should not steal Master Seriously's wand! Naughty boy!"

"I'm not going to steal it. I just wanted to borrow it. I just need it to cast a spell on the painting."

"Is bad-mouthed painting saying bad words again?"

"Definately! But we think we have a way to fix it. But we need the wand."

"Alright. But Dobby will watch to make sure you don't steal it!"

"Is Dobby your name? Hi! I'm Harry." Dobby suddenly found himself shaking Harry's hand. "Let's go!"

He ran back to the painting, which seemed to still be screaming.

"Nasty, nasty painting! Says horrible things about Master Seriously."

"Go ahead, Harry."

"Abstergo Tertilis!"

A gray light went from the wand to the portrait. It hit near the edge, about waist high. A small circle of white about an inch in diameter appeared where the paint was removed.

"It's probably because it's not your wand. I bet with your wand you could erase almost the whole painting. Let's see if she'll let us past." Luna stuck her head beyond the charm's field and appeared to say something. Walburga kept screaming something.

"Do it again. Maybe erase some of her."

Harry cast the spell again, erasing part of her foot. Even though she moved her foot away from the paintless spot, the missing piece of the foot didn't come back.

Luna stuck her head beyond the silencing charm, and this time after she moved back the portrait swung open. Beyond, set into the wall, was a small alcove. There was a pile of gold and something else. Luna picked it up and showed it to Harry.

"It's a locket. I wonder whose it is? 'S' made out of a snake? Does it open?"

"It doesn't seem to. Harry, I can see the line from you to it, but there's another line from it off that way. It's the same way as another of your lines. I think whatever's on the other end of that line connects with the targets of all your other lines. We'll have to check the cup. Here, put this in your pocket."

They did, and closed the painting. Luna and Harry stepped up to the painting again.

"That was interesting. There's a whole pile of gold back there."

"And you stole it! You stole from the House of Black!"

"No. We left it. What are we going to spend it on? But thank you for showing us."

"You didn't steal the gold?"

"No. But I bet Sirius would like to know about this. Thank you for the password."

"NOOOOO!" the painting screamed.

"Dobby, can you put this wand back?"

"Yes, Harry. She is still being naughty."

"We'll go tell Sirius what we did, and he can take care of it."

They went back to the dining room.

"Find anything interesting, kids?" Sirius asked, not expecting the reply he got.

"Oh yes. Behind that picture on the other side of that wall is a secret hole filled with gold."

"HUH? Behind my mother's portrait? How did you find it? How did you get past the portrait?"

"Luna detected it. And we, uh, sort of, well, we borrowed your. . . ." The last word was so low that no one could hear it.

"You borrowed my what?"

"Your wand." Luna said. "We figured if we threatened to erase the picture, it would let us pass. And it did. Now we know the password, 'Ab initio Blackness.'"

Selene looked at her children, and said, "You threatened a portrait with a wand?"

"She was saying bad words at us."

"After you threatened her, I'm not surprised."

Sirius cut in, "No, Selene. I'm sure she was saying bad words before they threatened her. She has a mouth on her that would shame a sailor. Where's my wand now?"

"I gave it to Dobby to put it back where we found it."

Sirius' eyes widened. "Harry, don't do that. It's against the law to give a house elf or a goblin a wand."

That led to a discussion on the law and house elves. Harry and Selene were on the "free the house elves" side, and Sirius was on the

"They don't want to do anything but serve, so let them" side. After a few minutes of discussion, Selene decided it was time to go.

After they got home, Selene turned to the kids. "Harry Lovegood! Don't you ever use someone else's wand without permission! And you don't threaten anyone! Do you hear? A wand is an awesome responsibility, and I don't think you are taking it seriously, young man."

"It was my idea," Luna said.

"That goes for you, too. Now off to bed, both of you!"

"Yes, Mum."

"Yes, Aunt Selene."

- - -

Sirius and Remus had a good laugh over Harry threatening a painting. They went to the hall, and removed the silencing charm.

"You ungrateful traitor! You stain on the noble house of Black. . . ."

"What was that password, Moony?"

"In the beginning, Blackness. Oh, the first part is Latin."

"Ab initio Blackness!" The painting shut up and swung open.

"Not bad. Looks like mad money, or emergency funds. Amazing. I never knew it was here."

"Uh, Padfoot? Look at this."

He looked where Remus was pointing at the front of the picture.

"How the hell did Harry do that?"

- - -

Once they were upstairs they put the locket in the closet with the cup.

"What are we going to do with them?"

"I don't know. Keep them until we can figure out what the magic is on them. It may take us a long time to do that. I've never seen spells like this."

"I just don't like the idea of anything Dark attached to me."

"We'll get rid of it eventually. I won't let anything have a hold on you, except me."

"Thanks, Luna. I love you. Good night."

"I love you, too, husband. Good night."

And they went to their own rooms.

Notes, Chapter 5:

The idea for a self-updating folder anchored magically with a lock of hair came from Wishweaver's marvelous story, *Realizations*. Used with permission.

Yes, I know in canon that the locket was originally in the cave. However, Harry's connections are to where the horcruxes are right now, not where they were hidden, so I had to re-arrange them a little. The fake locket is probably in a Fidelius-protected orphanage guarded by Heliopaths, and will not be part of this story.

Kelvar is a word for animals from one of the Tolkein notebooks.

Thank you for your reviews!

Many thanks to my Betas Mione Green and Kaetti who rescued you from many misspellings of Ollivander and missing appostrophies in "let's!" It's a better story thanks to them.

Chapter 6 Like Rain that Melts the Fallen Snow

Depending on who you talked to, time passed either slowly or quickly. The adults felt there wasn't enough hours in the day to get everything they needed done, let alone what they wanted. When they did get a chance to work on the projects they enjoyed for themselves, they never had as much time as they needed. Meanwhile, like an example of Einstein's theory of Relativity, time seemed to drag for Harry and Luna. The days were filled with jobs that seemed to take forever. An hour of writing, or arithmetic, or Runes could stretch into years. If there was something coming up in the future, it took forever to reach that point on the calendar.

Spring came and with it Luna's eighth birthday. Lessons continued in writing, reading, runes, arithmetic, geography, and world and British history. Harry, when asked, told Sirius what spell they used on the picture, and the next time they were at his house they noticed the picture was gone. The place was much brighter, too, with lighter walls, brighter lighting, windows with the curtains drawn back, and new, light colored carpets. Selene and Larry thought the place looked a million times better. Harry and Luna didn't seem to notice the different.

- - -

Summer came and Selene arranged for Harry and Luna to magically learn modern and ancient Greek, followed soon after by a trip to Greece. Among the visits to the ancient temples, ruins, and historical places, they spent a day with a fawn and a dryad. The fawn regaled them with stories of the warrior witches and wizards who fought the Nazi's and Grindelwald's forces during World War II. The dryad spoke of the magical creatures that used to live in her forest, the griffins, the dragons, the oreads who would visit from the mountains, the bamffs (which seemed to be some sort of fuzzy, magical elephant), and the crumpled-horned snorkacks. Something about the distant relative of the unicorn caught Larry's attention, and he questioned the tree-lady extensively about them. Harry and Luna received a seedling as a gift from the dryad.

Luna became a minor celebrity when she detected something on a hike near some cliffs overlooking the Aegean Sea. Her Sight had improved enough so that she was able to detect hidden magic designed to be overlooked by someone like her. With the help of her mother, who cast the mage-sight spell on the rest of the family, they made their way through a trapped cave to a hidden temple to Dianna. The Greek magical government awarded them a hefty finder's fee and the family spent a couple of days with the magical archaeologists who worked on the find. Selene was proud, but secretly upset, when they explained all the traps that Luna had bypassed. She had missed almost all of them. She had noticed that as they Luna had led them in, she and Harry had kept up a discussion of what Luna was seeing. As quick as Luna was to describe a magical field Harry was suggesting its warding properties and ways to bypass it. He was right a surprising amount of the time. She wasn't sure that he was even paying much attention to the magical impressions he was getting from the mage-sight she had cast on him.

While in Greece, Luna and Harry found time alone to pull out the world map her father had given her. Using the sun to find the compass directions, they guessed that the object magically connected to Harry was in Albania or Bosnia-Herzegovina. It was hard to be sure because it was two or three millimeters per hundred kilometers; so even a small error could be off by a lot. They weren't sure what to do with this information, but they felt better knowing it.

- - -

Harry's real birthday came and went with just a few whispered "happy birthdays."

Harry and Luna, and often Larry, and sometimes Ron and Ginny went on day excursions with Remus and Sirius to the various sights to see around Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire. Harry and Luna met their first ghost in a castle outside of Lincoln. He was a Norman knight, and only spoke French. Larry could translate a bit, but the ghost wasn't interested in talking to them, since they didn't know French, they obviously were peasants. They left him in his lonely ruins.

They also met Remus' friend Father John, but couldn't fit a dinner in. Remus promised that they would get a chance. Selene was nervous about the kids keeping the Secrecy Act and stayed non-committal.

- - -

Fall came and the twins went to their first year of Hogwarts. Ron and Ginny (and Molly) felt the Burrow was very quiet. Harry and Luna were invited over a lot more often. When Selene noticed their homework suffering, she threatened to restrict their time with the Weasleys, but Harry and Luna worked harder, and no privileges were removed.

- - -

In late September Selene went to an international conference of spell-crafters. Luna and Harry worked on convincing Larry to take them on a trip to Lake District while Selene was away. He finally broke down and agreed. So while Selene was at the Miskatonic University the rest of the family was at an inn in Shap. Larry rented a car, and they visited the Muncaster castle, the Irish Sea near Whitehaven, various waterfalls and lakes, the Laurel and Hardy Museum, and one day -- following Luna's direction -- they found themselves in the town of Little Hangleton. About a mile out of town, Luna asked that Larry stop the car. They were at the top of a hill, with a beautiful valley spread out before them. Luna convinced her father to take a walk with Harry and her.

They headed off the road, Luna leading. It was a glorious Autumn day, with a blue sky and little fluffy clouds. They seemed to be following a path, but then Luna stopped.

"Is there a problem, lilac?" Larry asked.

"Yes Daddy. There's a ward in front of us. It looks like an anti-Muggle ward. It stretches pretty far to the left and right. It doesn't seem to be anything else, so I think we can go on."

They traveled further. None of them noticed anything as they passed the ward. A little further on, Luna halted again.

"There's another ward here. It's different. It's," she squinted at it. "It looks like it's supposed to repel witches and wizards. Daddy, what happens when a wizard crosses a ward like that?"

"I don't know, little larch. Could do one of many things. Does it look like it's a trigger?" He knew she could somehow see triggered spells.

"It looks a lot like an anti-Muggle ward; a mind spell linked to it."

"Then it's probably a standard 'Keep away' ward. If you cross it you suddenly remember there's something else you want to do. Watch." He strode past Luna and Harry, and turned around.

"You know, we should be getting back to the inn. It's getting late."

It wasn't even lunch time yet. "That sounds like a good idea, Daddy. Why don't you go back to the car, and we'll be along shortly."

"Don't be long, mango." He headed back along the path they had come. As soon as he was out of sight, they took out their wands. They were still closely supervised when Luna's parents allowed them to be used, but the wands were locked away in the liquor cabinet. The problem was that Luna could see how the lock mechanism reacted when they cycled through the runes, and she could discover the combination in a very short time. They only took the wands out when Larry was busy on a story, and only practiced with them for short periods of time. They practiced some of the spells in the Standard Book of Spells, and were getting more of them working. They could levitate objects, and do some simple transformations. Harry and Luna couldn't understand the reason you would want to transform a match into a pin, but they could do it. The other thing that they found was that Luna could modify the spells she could cast. Since she could see what the spell looked like, she would play with it, watching both its effect and its form.

They had studied several magical items around the house -- a set of self stirring tea spoons, the Never-Melt candles, and the lock on the liquor cabinet -- trying to see how a spell could be turned off. They hadn't had any luck in getting it to work, though. They guessed that

other objects connected to Harry's curse-scar would be magically guarded, and turning off the triggering ward would be a useful skill. But they hadn't come close to that sort of spell casting.

Luna took her wand and picked up a rock. "Harry, the ward is about five meters thick. I've never seen one that thick, but if you can get past it, it shouldn't affect you any more." She transformed the rock into a clock (her clocks didn't work, but it looked functional) and threw it down the path.

"Harry, please go get my clock. It's on the other side of the ward."

Harry smiled and took a running start. He only made it a few feet before he stopped dead, and turned back to Luna.

"Harry, get the clock, please."

"No, I have to, uh. . . ."

"Do it right after you get the clock."

"OK." He turned towards the clock, and kept turning, ending up facing Luna.

"We should go."

"No, Harry, step backwards, toward the clock. Please get my clock."

Harry took a step backwards. He took another, or tried, but couldn't make his foot go back. He put it down, but it was now in front of the other, and he had to move his whole body forward to avoid falling down. Once he was moving, he just kept walking, despite Luna's please. He walked out of the wards, right past Luna, and kept walking. Luna caught up with him, and got him to put away the wand, and they walked back to the car.

That evening, they walked around outside the inn.

"I'm sorry, Luna, I just couldn't keep going."

"It's all right, Harry. It's a powerful spell, and we have to admit, we're just beginners. We'll come back someday when we have better skills. In the meantime, let's enjoy the evening, husband."

He smiled at her, "Have I thanked you recently for giving me this wonderful family?" She shook her head. "Then thank you." Hand in hand they walked back to the inn.

- - -

"Ah, Mr. Black. Please come in."

"Thank you Mr. Cimmerman. I didn't expect to hear back from you so quickly."

"Here at Gringotts time is money. But it turned out to be a mostly straight forward curse breaking. As you can see from the invoice, the basic spell was a limitation on who can open the locket. My guess is that it was limited to the owner."

"Do you know who the owner is?"

"Not by name, but we'll get to that in a minute. Behind that limitation were three hexes keyed to curse anyone unauthorized who got the locket open. The first was a knee-reversal spell. After that were two other spells, keyed to gender of the person opening the locket. Either one would have caused extreme embarrassment and a trip to St. Mungo's to whoever was struck by them."

"That didn't happen, did it?"

"Please, Mr. Black! We are professionals. And whoever set up these curses wasn't. The contents lead me to believe that it was a student. A student with extensive dark knowledge, but still an amateur."

"And the owner? You said you knew who it was?"

"Yes. Here's the contents. It was shrunk. We unshrank it at no charge, by the way."

"Thank you."

"You may not know, but a magical photograph picks up magical impressions too. While a defense lawyer could argue that it isn't conclusive, the young lady on the right has a magical signature that conforms to the spells on the locket. She looks rather familiar, but I can't place her."

"But you can place the other one, right."

"Yes, I must say I am glad that I don't interact with Mrs. Malfoy on a regular basis. I think I would have a hard time looking her in the eye after seeing that."

"The other is her sister, Bellatrix, who is serving a life sentence in Azkaban. The room is probably the Slytherin dorm one of them slept in."

"Ah, yes. Well, here you go. You can pay one of the goblins in the lobby. Have a good day."

- - -

"Mr. English. Miss Nelson. Shocked! Shocked, I say! To catch students in a broom closet at this time of the night."

"Please, Professor Croaker, don't dock us points."

"I'm afraid that the Headmaster insists that things like this must be punished. Therefore I am taking one point from Gryffindor and one from Hufflepuff. Also, you will both serve detention. . ." he checked a parchment, making a note on it, "next Tuesday from eight twenty to eight forty in the Astronomy Tower. Don't be late, and don't be early. Miss Shoenecker and Mr. Tomaszewski will be there between eight and eight twenty. Sorry. I'm assigning so many detentions now, that I can only give you twenty minutes."

"Uh, thank you Professor."

"Now, be a gentleman, and take Miss Nelson back to her house. I'll meet you by the door to the kitchen -- you do know where that is? -- in ten minutes, sharp! Punctuality, it's so important."

As the two students walked down the corridor, he heard Wade English saying, "But the entrance to Hufflepuff house is just around the corner. Why would it take me ten minutes to get to the kitchen?"

"Shut up, and I'll show you. . . ."

Algie Croaker sighed. "You're only alive once," he muttered. If he had to be here two nights a week, he would at least make it worth while. But he wished he were with his wife. He was going to tell Dumbledore that he wouldn't be returning next year.

- - -

Winter came and with it snow angels, snow ball fights, snow dragons, and Christmas. For the second year in a row Harry received presents. He thought about Dudley, and how even though he got so much, he really had so little. He wouldn't have been able to put it in words, but he knew there was something wrong with the way Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon expressed their love for their son. He shook his head. That was another lifetime ago. He was home, and he was with his family. He went to find someone to hug -- he didn't care who.

- - -

"Sirius."

"Cissy. Nice of you to stop by."

"I see you got rid of your mother's painting. Planning to put something else there?"

"Well, I found this photograph, but it's a bit small."

"Sirius! Give me that! Who have you shown this too?"

"No one. But I was curious when I found out that you were looking at this locket. It was Bella's, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I thought she might have charmed it to let me in, seeing as what was in it. But no."

"Here's the locket, merry Christmas."

"I don't know if I should thank you for giving me someone else's property as a gift."

"Well, then you better have these."

"Gifts? For me and Draco? Sirius, we never got along especially well when we were young. And you hate my husband. Why are you doing this?"

"Because you're family. Maybe not close, but you are. And in some way that seems important. I've lost a number of friends, and I want to hold on to what I have left."

"I don't know what to say. . . ."

"When one doesn't know what to say, it's best to say nothing."

"Where's that from?"

"I can't remember."

"Changing the subject, why didn't you bring Draco?"

"Because after your last visit with my son, he asked his father several embarrassing questions, and was beaten for it. I thought I'd avoid the whole thing."

"And you wonder why I dislike your husband? Tell me you're happy with him?"

"I'm happy with him."

"Now tell me the truth."

"I'm safe with him."

"That's a bad choice to have to make."

"Tell me about bad choices, Mr. Act-Before-He-Thinks-And-Ends-Up-In-Azkaban."

"Ouch. But if your thinking before you act ever moves you away from him, you do have a place to stay."

"Thank you, Sirius."

"And try not to let your husband turn Draco into another version of himself. Try to get the kid to think for himself. I'm sure you can do that and teach him not to anger his father."

"We'll see. Have a happy Christmas, Sirius."

"You, too, Narcissa. Thanks for stopping by."

- - -

The family did a lot of visiting during the Twelve Days of Christmas. They went over to the Weasleys, and had some of the Weasleys (Ron, Ginny, and the twins) over in return. The twins had their wands confiscated after the second warning for the use of underage magic.

They went to Sirius' house and enjoyed another round of opening gifts. The kids each got a training broom. While Sirius knew they had flown a real broom, this one had two safety features -- a limitation on the speed, and a limit on how far from a specific point the broom would fly. Both features were under parental control.

- - -

A few days after Christmas the Lovegoods were invited to the Swamp. There they met Algie's sister, Mrs. Longbottom, and her grandson

Neville. Luna and Harry found him quiet and shy. As the adults talked after dinner, the children tried to figure out something to do.

"We could go out. Make a snow dragon or something?"

"No. My Gran would have a fit if I got these clothes dirty. I know how to play chess."

"But there are three of us. I have a deck of exploding snap cards. . . ."

"I don't know how to play."

"We can teach you." And so they did.

When the parents/guardians/grandmother came to collect the kids, they were given a sight that they had never seen. (Of course, Larry and Selene had only met Neville that day, so most sights of him would new.) But the others had known him for quite a while and the fact that they had never seen him laughing hadn't seemed strange until that very moment when they did.

"Well, Augusta," Algie said to his sister, "I think I'll go ahead with plans for spring break."

"I think you're right, Algie. And Harry and Luna are invited, too, of course."

"Thank you very much, Augusta. I think we can be assured that they will enjoy it."

The children were collected and soon went home with their respective guardians.

- - -

"Do you have your toothbrushes?"

"Yes, Mum."

"Harry, you packed the socks this time?"

"Yes, Aunt Selene."

"And you both remember the Secrecy Law. We don't want Uncle Remus to have to get the Aurors in to Obliviate his friend."

"And remember your manners!"

"Yes Mum."

"Yes, Aunt Selene."

- - -

"Thank you for dinner, Father John."

"You are most certainly welcome, Luna. Now, my friend Remus has asked me not to subject you to my, how did you put it? Ah, yes, over active curiosity. So in the spirit of keeping him from being angry at me, I'll answer any questions you have for me."

"Why are you called 'Father'?"

"It's an ancient term of respect that goes all the way back to the earliest Christians. Saint Paul acknowledges in one of his letters that he is the spiritual father of the people he's corresponding with."

"Who's Saint Paul?"

"He's one of the writers of the Bible."

"What's the Bible?" Luna asked.

"That means 'book'," Harry reminded her.

"Oh yes. A book called Book?"

"Yes. You know Greek! Amazing! It's a collection of writings put together over several thousand years that we take to be inspired by the Creator of the Universe. It's full of important words of wisdom like

'Love one another, because God loves you,' 'do not lie', 'do not steal,' 'respect your bodies,' 'if someone hits you on one cheek, then turn and give him the other cheek. . . .'"

"Your aunt and uncle used to hit you on all four of your cheeks," Luna giggled. Harry rolled his eyes. He was over feeling that it was his fault that they punished him. He had been punished numerous times by his new guardians, but never for things that weren't his fault, and never with beatings.

"What's this? Is someone abusing you, son?"

Remus interrupted. "Not any more. He used to be with an abusive family, but not any more."

"Not since Luna rescued me so we could be married. Opps."

"You rescued Harry to marry him. Don't you think you're a little young to get married."

"Mum thinks so. But I don't know why she can be married and I can't."

"It could be because she grew up first, and then decided who to marry?"

"Could be. But I still don't see why I have to wait."

Fr. John chuckled. "One reason is the law says that you can't get married until you're older."

"Oh, bugger."

"Luna!"

"Sorry, Uncle Remus. But Mr. Croaker didn't say anything about that."

"What did Mr. Croaker say," Remus asked.

"He said that one usually has a wedding with a big party afterward, but the important thing that makes it a wedding is a vow. So we skipped the wedding and vowed."

Fr. John chuckled again. "So, did you promise to forswear all others, to love each other in sickness and health, for richer or poorer, in good times and bad, until death parts you from each other?"

Remus had a feeling of dread pass over him. Were they playing with marriage vows?

"No."

Remus breathed a sigh of relief.

"We promised to love, honor, and obey each other," Harry said.

"Basic and to the point. But you'll have to do it again when you're older for it to be official."

"Does that mean I can't live with Luna anymore? Do I have to go back. . . ." He seemed to be unable to say any more.

"Oh, no, Harry! Mr. and Mrs. Lovegood took you into their house, didn't they? They made you part of their family without a marriage. No, you go and keep living with them, and I think you'll grow up to be a fine young man.

"Have you given any thought to what you'll be when you're older?"

"Nine," Luna answered.

Fr. John burst out laughing at that, but then stopped when he saw that Remus wasn't laughing.

"Remus, my friend. Are you feeling well? You look a bit off."

"What? Oh. No, I don't feel so well. I'm sorry, John. I think I should take the children, and head back to my place."

"Very well. I'll give you a ride back to your house. It was wonderful meeting you, Harry, Luna."

- - -

"So, let me make sure I have this straight. You vowed to love each other intending to get married?"

"Yes."

"And did you feel anything when you did that?"

"No."

"No. Except Luna's hands, we were holding hands."

"And you didn't notice any blue glow around you when you did it?"

They both answered "No."

"Good."

"But afterward there were blue lines connecting our hands."

Remus looked at their hands. "It's not there now."

"Yes it is. It's magic. And I can see magic."

"Still blue, and still there?"

"Yes."

"I saw it too, last summer in Greece. Aunt Selene cast mage-sight on us all. When the government people came, she had us hold hands so no one else would notice."

Remus put his palm to his face, and told them to go to bed.

- - -

"Thanks for taking the kids this weekend, Remus. It was nice having some time off."

"It was my pleasure, Selene. Can you send the kids out to play or something, so I can talk to you alone?"

"Sure, give me a minute."

A few minutes later they were alone. "Now, what's this about."

"I found out about them being married."

Selene nodded. "I should have known they couldn't keep it secret."

"It's not really their fault. Only someone who knows a bit about magical vows would have picked it up. I did some research before James and Lily were married. But I only knew for sure after specifically interrogating them. Luna was quite disappointed when they found out that the law says they're too young to get married."

"The law doesn't quite apply, does it? That's like the law of gravity saying things have to fall, but birds still fly."

"Let's not get off the track here. I checked and the bond isn't very strong. Have you considered having it broken?"

"Are you crazy, Remus? You didn't see that boy when he got here. He was almost shaking if you looked at him wrong, let alone raised your voice. You've researched this. If you break the bond it would be like having his heart broken! I can't do that to him."

"It might still happen, if either of them falls in love with someone else."

"It's a lose-lose situation, Remus, if this marriage doesn't work. If I break it now under the theory that they might fall in love with someone else, then Harry may never recover, and may never love again. If I let it go, and they love each other like brother and sister, and so don't fall in love with each other, then when they do, they'll probably hate each other from then on out. I'm not going to hurt them

now just because it may not work. I'd rather try to help them eventually get to a mature love."

"Hard to think of that, when they're such children now. Hard to imagine them mature."

"Not really. You see flashes of it. Harry brushing Luna's hair. Luna and Harry doing the dishes together. Luna has more than the Sight, Remus. Sometimes she has insight that you wouldn't expect from someone her age. And Harry -- most of the scars have healed, but you can see if you watch for it, that his upbringing has left its mark. No, I can see hints of the mature people they will be."

"Alright, then. I'll leave it alone. Have you told anyone?"

"No. Not even Larry knows."

"Shouldn't you tell him?"

"Are you kidding? I love him completely, but you know how he is. Did you know him before he had to leave the Aurors?"

"Not really, no."

"That Larry I would have told. This one -- I'll tell him someday."

- - -

Spring came and Luna and Harry were going to receive early birthday presents. Monday morning after Easter they were to dress in clean play clothes, and get their brooms. Larry and the kids then floo-ed to the Swamp. They were met by Mrs. Croaker, and led out to the back yard. There was a pond off to one side, but it didn't look like a swamp. Outside they met Mr. Croaker, Mrs. Longbottom, Neville, and another woman, with short, gray hair, and yellow eyes.

"Hello! I'm Madam Hooch, and Professor Croaker asked me to teach you the magical art of flying a broom. Mr. Lovegood, if you would take your children's brooms to that marker, and set them for thirty meters distance, and three meters maximum altitude, we'll begin.

"Mr. Longbottom, there's no need to look worried. You have a new training broom, and we have it set for a maximum of two meters. I'm guessing that you'll soon be having so much fun that you won't worry about how high you fly."

Harry and Luna had a great time and learned a lot. Luna, being self taught, didn't quite get it right, and Harry picked up her bad habits. Madam Hooch worked with them to correct their mistakes. Neville, too, learned to fly, despite his fear of heights. It was the other children that helped him overcome his fear. When he was enjoying himself he would forget to be afraid.

After the first day, Ron and Ginny joined the lesson. With more children around, Neville had more distraction, and became a more confident flier. Ron and Ginny knew the basics from watching their brothers, and were soon flying as well as the others.

They had several days of "lessons." Actually, it only took a day for them to get the basics, and after that it was mostly supervised play, with Madam Hooch giving pointers when the situation presented itself. She set up obstacle courses for them to fly through or play follow the leader. They tossed a Quaffle around (which Neville hated; he couldn't catch it, nor get it to the person he was throwing at.) They were given beater's bats and a Bludger. Luna and Ginny had the most problem with this game; Luna could protect herself by hitting the heavy black ball away, but couldn't direct it, and Ginny because she was so light, every time she hit it she almost flipped upside down. They didn't try to catch the snitch. The training brooms that Neville, Harry, and Luna flew were too slow, even after they were no longer limited by the parental controls.

One day Ginny and Luna were told to wear dresses. That day Madam Hooch taught them how to fly side-saddle. It limited the games they could play, but both girls liked being able to fly "like a lady."

At the end of the week Madam Hooch gave an update to the adults. Harry seemed a natural flier, and should get a good broom once he was old enough, and she'd encourage him to go out for Quidditch. Luna and Neville understood the basics, and Neville might get a

beater position on a Hogwarts' Quidditch team if he practiced. Ron and Ginny were also good fliers and, like Harry, might make a house team at any of a number of positions, if they applied themselves. The parents/guardians thanked her. Algie compensated her as agreed, and invited her back for a review session during the summer. She said it depended on what other commitments she had.

- - -

"Professor Croaker!"

"Professor McGonagall. How may I help you?"

"A word please. Is it true that you assign detentions in the Astronomy Tower?"

"Yes."

"What do you have the children doing up there?"

"I only assign it to the upper class students. And they do in the Astronomy tower what most couples do in the Astronomy Tower."

"Professor! How could you?"

"Easily. I give them a little privacy -- not enough to get them in trouble; they're minimally supervised, and I have warning wards set to warn me if things get out of hand."

"You WHAT?"

"Just to keep them honest."

"I can't believe you do this!"

"Were you married, Minerva?"

"Yes, I was. I lost my husband in the war against Grindelwald. But what has that to do with anything?"

"And did you meet him at Hogwarts."

"Yes, we were in the same house, although he was a year ahead of me."

"And are you going to tell me that you never found private time around the school to be together."

"MR. CROAKER! We never engaged in what some of these children have been doing!"

"And neither are the ones I'm giving time in the Astronomy Tower. They get a little privacy to snog and talk, but not much more or my wards go off, and they lose the privilege. Think about what it was like when you were here, and then tell me that I'm doing something terrible. Remember. Then talk to me."

- - -

Luna's birthday came, and summer followed. The family learned several variants of German, ancient and modern, and had a vacation in the magical areas of the Black Forest. They practiced reading old German runes on ancient standing stones; they visited a dwarf mine (and puzzled over the sign that had a red circle and diagonal line through the word "Disney"). They went to a performance of part of Wagner's Ring Cycle, which the children were bored with, and reminded Larry of something he had once heard, "The Teutonic reputation for cruelty is not undeserved; they have operas that last for days." Harry thought it would have been an exciting story if it weren't for all the singing. Larry gathered information that indicated that the crumpled-horned snorkacks lived even further north. He could not get Selene to change the vacation at the last minute to look for them.

- - -

They returned to Britain and their normal routine. Around Harry's real birthday they again had flying lessons with Madam Hooch. She was between sessions at a Quidditch camp in a heavily warded valley in Switzerland. After much begging, they got Larry to bring the broom the children had used twice before on their adventures. It was a

Nimbus Crown Victoria, Auror model. Madam Hooch let the children try to catch a snitch using it. It turned out to not be a good Quidditch broom. Great acceleration, lousy maneuverability. Even though he got close to the snitch several times, Harry only caught it once. Madam Hooch thought that was pretty good, considering the limitations of his equipment. When Ron got a turn on Mr. Lovegood's broom, he went rocketing out of the area, and Madam Hooch had to chase him down. He claimed he lost control but later whispered to Harry that he just wanted to see how fast it would go.

- - -

During the summer Remus stopped taking the kids to historic sites, but on nice days brought them to the beach. Remus, being Remus, had to fill them with historical information anyway: how Napoleon had considered building a tunnel under the Channel to get his army to England; how the Spanish Armada had been destroyed when a wizard had shuffled the World Deck's suits of staffs and cups and conjured up a storm that wrecked the invading ships; the evacuation of Dunkirk; the Chunnel. The children put up with it to splash and play in the North Sea.

But summer ran out, and the older Weasleys went back to Hogwarts. Luna and Harry went with the Weasleys on their back to school shopping trip to Diagon Alley. They found the book store to be a fascinating place, but not having any money to spend on books, they were content to browse.

- - -

A week after Harry's new birthday, on a Wednesday when Selene was home, Harry and Luna were cleaning up after lunch. For some reason, Selene wasn't supervising them; she was upstairs. Harry and Luna had practiced first level spells (and second, but none of those had worked), carefully, when home alone with Larry. Just recently, after his birthday in fact, he had gotten the Wingardium Leviosa spell to work. Now, while they were collecting the lunch dishes, Harry applied the spell to the contents of the table. Unlike Selene, who could gather all the dirty dishes from the table with a single, silent swish of her wand, Harry had to swish and flick, and incant

"Wingardium Leviosa" for each dish, and concentrate to float it into the kitchen. He had tried to put the silverware on a plate, but it had fallen off, so he carried it in to the kitchen the Muggle way. Then he had floated the dishes in one at a time. Now he was beginning in the glasses. He levitated his glass, and with his wand pointing at it while concentrating on keeping it upright he started floating it into the kitchen while walking behind it.

About that time Selene had re-entered the kitchen from the hallway. She was wearing a formal, green, off the shoulder gown. Luna looked at her mother in awe.

Selene smiled when she saw her daughter's face. She couldn't ask for a better compliment.

"Do you like it? Your father and I are going to a fancy restaurant on Friday for our anniversary."

Just then something bumped her near the kidney. She turned and saw Harry a few steps away. She looked down -- there was a glass floating next to her, and a dribble of pumpkin juice on the dress.

"Oh! No!" she exclaimed.

"Opps, sorry. I'll clean it up!" Harry offered. He put the glass on the counter, waved his wand and began, "Abstergo Tert. . . ."

"No! Stop!" Selene yelled. Harry paused in his casting. Selene took out her wand while explaining. "This dress is silk. You can't just use any cleaning charm. It takes a special one. Nulla Tempus!" The stain, and dress around it, glowed white, then the white changed to a red color. "Unfortunately, the cleaning charms for silk and other delicate fabrics are a closely held secret of the Cleaners Guild."

Luna was staring at the spell. "I've never seen that color before," she whispered.

"It's just red," Harry told her.

"No, the color of the magic. It's . . . weird."

"It's a time stop spell. You've probably never seen any time magic. It will stop the juice from soaking in, and minimize the staining until I can get it cleaned. Which I better do very quickly before the spell wears off. Wands!" she held out her hand, and Harry and Luna gave her their wands. "Good. I've got to get changed quickly, and get this taken care of right away. You two, dishes, then runes! I'll be back from the cleaner's shortly."

She raced upstairs to get changed, and was soon floo-ing to a shop in Hogsmeade.

It was only after she had the clean dress did it register that the glass had been floating.

- - -

"Merry Christmas, Cissi! Hello Draco!"

"Merry Christmas, Sirius."

"Draco, why don't you go in there, and meet Harry and Luna! And leave the presents alone, we open them later!"

"So, your husband not coming?"

"No. When he heard that the Weasleys were going to be here, he decided to have a headache."

"I'd be lying if I said I will miss the man, but I will say I'm sorry for your sake."

"Don't be silly. Now, introduce me to your guests."

- - -

"Hello, I'm Draco Malfoy."

"Hi, I'm Harry Lovegood, and this is Luna Lovegood."

"Are you purebloods?"

"What does that mean?"

"It means, have your family been witches and wizards for a long time, without marrying Muggles."

Harry and Luna looked at each other, shrugged and turned back to the new boy. "I don't know. I never asked."

"My Mum and Dad are wizards, and so were my grandparents."

"My Mum and Dad were, too. But my aunt was a Muggle. Is it important?"

It was Draco's turn to look confused. "You have different parents?"

"Yes, we're distant cousins," Harry answered with the story they had agreed upon.

"Oh. Of course it's important! Pure bloods are the best wizards and witches, of course."

"Really? What makes them better?"

"They have no Muggle blood in them."

"Why does that matter?"

"Because, uh, because it does."

Luna wasn't finding the conversation very interesting. "That's not a very good reason. Rosamond Croaker is Muggle born, and she's just about the nicest witch I know. Although she is rather old. But she makes wonderful biscuits."

"She gave us some to have tonight. Do you want some?"

"Doesn't she have a house elf to make biscuits?"

"I don't think so. And Sirius has an elf, but he doesn't make biscuits."

"Here come the Weasleys! After we're all here, we'll eat then open presents!"

"I can't believe we're eating with Weasleys!"

"What's wrong with the Weasleys? Bill and Charlie are just brilliant on brooms, but don't expect them to talk to you much; Mrs. Weasley says it's because they're teenagers and they hate to be reminded that they were once smaller. And Ron's always beaten me at chess. He's OK. You have to watch out for the twins, but they're almost always funny. And Percy's a prat."

They were soon overwhelmed by red haired children. Harry made sure that Ron and Ginny were introduced to Draco. When Ron and Draco started talking about what their fathers had said about the other's father, Harry called a time out.

"Wait a minute! Just because your fathers don't like each other is no reason you have to fight. Just like Jim and Huck in the story Huckleberry Finn, there's no reason that you can't be good friends despite what the grown ups think." He was guessing that Draco hadn't read the book; he was sure Ron hadn't. He knew he was modifying the theme of the book, but the only other story that came to mind for this situation was Romeo and Juliet, and even Ron knew that story. And he didn't want to get into an argument over which boy he thought was Juliet. The two reluctantly stopped sniping at each other.

Dinner followed, and presents were opened. Then the party (minus Bill and Percy) was back to the dining room for an exciting double deck game of exploding snap. Draco had never played, but it was a quick game to learn. Despite his intentions he was soon enjoying himself.

He watched the adults. Sirius was laughing and joking as much as the twins. Mrs. Lovegood and his mother played quietly, with little smiles on their faces. He couldn't remember when he had last seen his mother smile. Mr. Lovegood appeared to be taking the game

seriously, and sitting between the twins he was definitely losing. Mr. Lupin sat next to Draco's cousin Sirius, and played strangely. He wasn't trying to win, and would avoid playing cards that would hurt Ginny Weasley, who sat on the other side of him -- going so far as to let them explode in his hand, rather than play them on the girl. However, whenever he got the chance (when the game direction reversed) he seemed to play them gleefully on Sirius. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley weren't concentrating on the game very much; they seemed to be watching the twins a lot and talking with the other adults.

The children were interesting to watch, too. The twins cheated; they would pass cards between themselves when they thought no one was watching. They were very good at avoiding doing it when their parents were watching. The older boy, Charlie, seemed to play aggressively, which in snap could cause the cards to explode more quickly if you couldn't get your runs built. Ron Weasley, who sat beside him, would get frustrated when a card exploded in his hand. Ginny seemed to play defensively, avoiding building runs so that the cards didn't explode. Luna he watched the most. She kept wining. He never saw a card explode in her hand. But she never seemed to care that she won, either.

But Harry, he was a mystery. He sometimes seemed to play aggressively and sometimes more conservatively. But whenever one of his cards exploded, he would burst into laughter, as if it was the funniest thing that ever happened to him. His laugh was contagious, and the adults' smiles increased as he laughed. Even Draco realized that he was smiling when Harry laughed. Playing games was a new experience for Draco, and he thought he'd like to try it again. He smiled a little more as he passed Ron a card that was warming up. Frustrating the youngest Weasley boy was a goal in itself.

The Christmas Eve party ended when there were too few cards to make runs. After he got home, and his father asked him about the other guests at the party, Draco didn't mention that Harry Lovegood was probably a Mudblood.

- - -

Luna's ninth birthday came in the spring, and Neville, Ron, Ginny, and Draco came to her party. To Draco's disappointment, they didn't play snap, but were sent out to play in the beautiful spring sunshine. They played Quiff, which was a game played with a Quaffle-like ball. The ball was enchanted to jump out of your hands at random times, though. There were two hoops for goals that spun; goals only counted when the Quiff was thrown through the hoop the right direction. The ball also had a tendency to move on its own when it was near a goal hoop. They played several games, with various three people teams. Whichever team got two of Harry, Ron, and Draco almost always won (except when Ron threw the ball through the hoop the wrong direction). Luna and Neville were the worst players, and Ginny was somewhere in between. But everyone seemed to have fun, and Draco didn't insult Ron or Ginny.

He didn't because he wanted to be invited over again.

- - -

"Hello Algie, what's up?"

"Can you take out the contents of that box, please."

Selene looked at the wooden box with the little door panel on the side held closed by a small latch. She cast a few detection spells, nullified some of the wards around it, cast a shield, and opened the box. A red light came from the box and bounced off her shield.

"Very good. Did Stout tell you?"

"No. I haven't seen him today. Tell me what?"

"Tell you that he just reached over and undid the latch and was stunned."

"No, he didn't tell me. But I just figured a plain wooden box and the Department of Mysteries didn't go together; so I started checking."

"Anyway, assume you're not good at wards, try this again with just a shield." He flicked his wand a few times, reactivating or recreating the security on it.

Selene muttered, "Protego," reached over, and moved the latch. The stunner, and a couple of other spells bounced off her shield.

"You see, even without trying to negate the wards, you're protected. Know what this is?" He held up a strange looking device.

"A Muggle's short, fat wand?"

Algie laughed. "Close. Might as well be. But it only casts one spell -- an electric shock designed to knock out the target. They call it a Teaser or something. But the thing is an electric shock wouldn't be affected by most common shields. If we replace the stunner with the shock, we protect against the ignorant crook."

"But not all of them."

"Well, you can't make things foolproof. . . ."

"Because fools are so ingenious. Yes, I know. So that's my assignment?"

"Go to it!"

- - -

Draco sat in his room and thought. He had had an interesting day. His father had arranged some boys to come over and visit. He had met Greg Goyle and Vincent Crabbe several times before, and Theodore Nott once before, too. But it was during times when their parents were getting together, and they had to be quiet. This time his father had invited them over to counter what he called "the influence of those bloody goody goodies." His father had stayed around to supervise. They had been served a formal lunch, then brought into the sitting room to talk. It had been pretty quiet. They talked a bit about Quidditch, before his father had made disapproving noises. Then they sat around wondering what to talk about. His father had

tried to get them to discuss what was going on in the Ministry, but the nine year olds didn't have much to say. No, Crabbe and Goyle didn't have anything to say. Nott and he had repeated what they had heard their parents say, which met with approval of the elder Malfoy, but didn't go much farther than that. There was a lot of sitting around looking at each other. Eventually his father had gone into one of his lectures about the mud bloods and Muggle born, and their supporters like the Weasleys and that old fool Dumbledore, being the ruin of the wizarding world. Crabbe and Goyle just looked stupidly at him. Noticing his pacing father moving away from them, Draco glanced over at Nott, and saw an expression he thought he recognized. Draco rolled his eyes, and Nott smiled. But then the sound of the voice told them that his father was turning back, and they both composed themselves again.

Except for that one moment, the day was a bore. What he had with the Lovegoods and Weasleys was fun. He guessed he and Nott would, too, if his father weren't around. Goyle and Crabbe just seemed like idiots. He began to look forward to going to Hogwarts.

- - -

"Selene, how's it going."

"Close. I've got the lightning spell working, and the trigger, but now I've got to get it working with the wards, the aiming spells, and see what we can do about the magical interference with electricity. I suppose that's one of the harder parts -- the very spells we use to aim it, cause it to try and avoid being aimed."

"Actually, that's a bigger To-Do list than I had hoped. The Department of Records is breathing down my back. They see this as a cheap way to lock up individual folders. Can you write up a report that I can give them, outlining what's been accomplished, and what needs to be done. At least some of them understand the difficulty in crafting a new spell."

"It's pretty late in the day. . . ."

"That's alright. Do it tomorrow. They want an update by Thursday so they can talk about it on Friday with Fudge."

"I'm off tomorrow."

"Oh, right, Wednesday. Would it be possible to get something written up, anyway?"

"Very well. I'll have it by Thursday."

"Thanks, Selene."

- - -

Harry and Luna were fascinated by Selene's work. Being in the Department of Mysteries, she really couldn't talk about her work very much. But she had set up a table outside so she could monitor the kids (and enjoy her day off) and they came over to watch.

They asked a lot of questions, and Selene was sure that they had been reading more magic books than just the first and second year books that they admitted to. She knew Luna had an intuitive grasp of wards; her actions in the Greek cave had shown that. She was sure that they couldn't cast any, though. She sent them away after one test where the lightning bolt shot right through the wooden door, leaving a smoking hole. She made some notes on that; they'd have to get the intensity of the electric shock right, otherwise they'd be killing people, rather than stunning them. She looked at the target she had conjured up -- undamaged. Targeting was another big problem. She made another note about automatic reset, so a pair of thieves wouldn't be able to get around the ward if the second was willing to sacrifice the first. She began resetting the equipment.

Harry and Luna were tossing the Quiff around. Playing Quiff wasn't as much fun when there were only four players, which was the state of things when Ron and Ginny came over. Now that school was out the twins would come play, too. Those games were usually George and Fred on one team, and Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Harry on the other.

It was very difficult to get the twins on different teams. Selene was trying to arrange a get together with Draco and Neville.

Meanwhile, Harry and Luna practiced throwing the ball to each other. Luna was getting better at it. They were startled by a loud crack from where Selene was working, which was followed by a short scream. They looked towards the table and saw Selene lying on the ground, smoke rising from her. They ran towards her.

Her eyes and mouth were open, and there was a burn mark on her stomach. The air had an unpleasant smell to it.

"Mum? Mummy? Get up!"

Harry put his head on her chest.

"I don't think her heart is beating."

"What do we do!"

"Call your dad, quick."

Luna ran towards the house, and Harry thought. He knew there was something that should be done to get her heart going, but he had no idea what. They knew enough anatomy to know that this was very bad. Mentally, he looked through all the spells he knew for something that would help, but he hadn't learned any healing magic. He stared at Selene's body then picked up her wand.

Luna was almost hysterical as she called her father. After the receptionist got him on the floo and he understood the problem, he couldn't get Luna to back out of the fireplace so he could get there. He asked the Quibbler receptionist to contact St. Mungo's and get help to his house right away. Then, after talking Luna out of the fireplace, he went home.

He tried to go outside, asking Luna to wait for the healers; that didn't work, as she clung to him, crying. Luckily, the Emergency healers appeared almost immediately. They all rushed to the back yard.

They found Harry lying next to Selene's body. He was unconscious. Selene was surrounded by a red glow.

"What happened? What is that?" the medi-wizard asked.

Luna looked at it and answered, "It's a time stop spell. Harry must have cast it to give you time to get here and save her."

The healers looked at each other, and got to work.

- - -

Harry woke up in a strange room. He started groping for his glasses, and Luna handed them to him. He looked around.

It was a fairly plain room, two beds, a couple of chairs. Luna was sitting on one close to him, and Larry was on the other, close to Selene.

"How is she?" Harry asked.

"Oh, Harry, you saved her!" Harry found himself in a tight hug.

"Thank you, Harry," Larry said, tears in his eyes. "I don't. . . . I couldn't. . . . Just thank you!"

Later, when the healers came to check on them, one of them asked, "So, how long have you been playing with time magic?"

"Never, sir. That was the first time."

His brow furrowed. "Then how did you do it?"

Harry explained about the incident with the dress.

"You got it right on the first time?"

"No, it took several times."

"But you have been practicing magic around the house?"

"Uh. . . ."

"Household charms and things? Don't worry, I won't report you. Most wizarding households do some of that. Well, Harry, it was an impressive feat of magic. However, it really drained you -- that's not an easy spell. You just needed some rest, and we couldn't leave you on the lawn when the rest of your family is here. But let's just check you out one more time, then you can get dressed and wait anxiously with the rest of your family for your mum to wake up. She'll need to be here for a few days; she still has some healing to do. But congratulations, son, you saved her." As he was talking, he was moving his wand over and around Harry. He looked concerned, and brought his wand back to his forehead.

"What do we have here? Looks like a nasty bit of spell damage. Not much external scarring, though. What happened?"

Larry cut into the conversation, "That happened when he was a baby; Not exactly sure, but it was an incident that involved Death Eaters."

"But you're OK now? No lasting effects?" The wand was still moving around his forehead. "That's quite a spell residue. And your eyes. . . . And your hair. . . ." He looked up at Larry with a shocked expression on his face. "You're raising Harry. . . ."

"Please," Larry interrupted, "As long as no one knows, he'll be safe. We know that former Death Eaters have searched for him. If this ever gets out, he'll be inundated with mail, callers, worshipers, and assassins. As well as the Ministry trying to use him. Please, I beg you, don't tell."

The Healer looked at them for a long moment, and said, "Well, lots of people have spell damage, and there's no lasting effects, so I don't see that we have to even note this. I'll be back in a little while to check on your wife. You," he pointed at Harry, "can get up and get dressed, but nothing strenuous for the next few days. I've got other -- sick people -- to care for. See you later."

"Thank you," Larry said, checking his name tag, "Healer McGonagall. Any relation to the Transfiguration. . . ."

"She's my mother," He said with a smile. "I get that question a lot. Good day!"

- - - - -

Notes, Chapter 6:

Title comes from a song Roger Whittiker sang, IF. The complete line is:

If only time would trickle slow/like rain that melts the fallen snow.

The answer to the question "What will you be when you're older" was actually given by my son, although the number given was six, as he was five at the time.

The comment on German opera came from the British TV show, Blackadder goes Fourth.

For more information on the deck of cards that destroyed the Spanish Armada, read Charles Williams' Greater Trumps.

My thanks to my Betas Mione Green and Kaetti. Due to Real Life, Kaetti hasn't gotten me the edited version of this chapter. She will, and then I'll probably re-post. To those who care about such things, you have Mione to thank for my avoidance of a cliffhanger when Selene was hurt. She's so scary she didn't even have to threaten me.

Chapter 7 The Philosopher's Stone

Selene spent a few days in St. Mungo's followed by a week of bed rest at home. The project was abandoned while she was convalescing. It was deemed that lightning and magic didn't mix.

But after Harry's impressive feat of magic, she worked more with the children on magic. She hadn't been teaching many spells; mostly concentrating on the other subjects that Hogwarts assumed children knew but didn't teach - like reading and writing and arithmetic. But now she found that the children were ready for some of the spells that they hadn't been able to learn. Over the next few months they learned how to do the Scourgify spell, the trick of levitating numerous objects from the table to the sink, and became more adept at using magic to clean the dishes.

She thought they caught on to transfigurations just a bit too quick. She'd have to think of somewhere else to secure the wands.

They mastered the Aquamenti spell, and no longer had to be near the stream to drench each other. Selene made sure that she monitored them constantly when she allowed them their wands. Or almost constantly. One day, when they were doing gardening, she got a floo call. While she was talking with a friend, Harry killed a bush that he tried to diffindo into a topiary animal.

- - -

Several times during the summer Draco and Neville came over. One time, with both Mr. Lovegood and Mr. Croaker monitoring, they were allowed to bring brooms and fly at the Quidditch pitch the Weasleys set up. Draco had a Quidditch broom -- a Comet 260. Ron and Ginny and the twins used older brooms, and Harry, Luna, and Neville used their training brooms. They were teased about their brooms. Luna ignored the taunts; Harry and Neville did too after Harry noticed (and mentioned to Neville) that their brooms might not be faster, but were more maneuverable than the Weasleys' brooms.

As they were walking back to the Lovegoods' house, Draco took a breath and started talking.

"I'm supposed to subtly convince you that pure-bloods are the best kinds of wizards."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "And how are you supposed to do that?"

"I already told you: subtly."

Luna chuckled, and said, "You do know that by telling us, you're not being subtle."

"But by being obvious about it, I'm actually subtly influencing you."

"Why are you trying to do that?" Neville asked.

"Because my father told me to. He's hoping that you'll grow up not only believing pure-bloods are better, but that people like my father are the best people for protecting pure-blood rights and privileges. And when the time comes, you'll help overthrow the wizarding government and put a pure-blood in charge."

"Isn't Fudge a pure-blood?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. But my father says that there are pure-bloods and there are pure-bloods, so it wouldn't surprise me if he considers Fudge the wrong kind of pure-blood. That's what he considers the Weasleys."

"A revolutionary conspiracy! How fun! Do we get to use fake names? Do I have to take up knitting?" Luna asked excitedly.

"Uh, I don't think so. I think they'll just hide their beliefs until they feel they have enough support to take over the world. Or at least the British wizarding world."

"You know, if you have to hide, you're probably doing something wrong," mused Harry.

"And you've never done anything wrong?" Draco said, a little angry that Harry seemed to be accusing his father of something.

Harry looked back, and saw Larry and Algie walking slowly behind. The more energetic children had moved far ahead of them.

"Of course I have," Harry answered. "It's just I've never tried to overthrow the wizarding government."

Luna volunteered, "We once flew my father's broom to Portsmouth to see the sea. Boy, did we get in trouble when Mum and Daddy found out."

Draco and Neville snickered. Neither of them had tried anything like that.

"Anyway, I suppose you can tell your father that you tried to influence us. But I've never met a Muggle-born wizard, so I don't know if they are worse than pure-bloods," Harry said.

"But if they're just as good, or better, maybe we can come up with another reason to overthrow the Minister," Luna said.

"Why would you want to overthrow the Minister of Magic?" Neville asked.

"Because not only does he eat Goblin pies, it would be fun!"

- - -

Summer was filled with trips to Remus' and the beach; vacation in Mexico (including an archaeological tour of a pyramid where Luna learned a lot about protective wards; Selene thought if Luna wasn't so naturally curious, she would think there was an ulterior motive to her questions); and a few more flying dates with Neville and Draco.

Fall came, the Weasleys (except Ginny, Ron, and Bill, who was working at Gringotts) went back to Hogwarts. Harry celebrated his tenth birthday. Selene and Larry celebrated their anniversary without a stained dress; Harry and Luna had both mastered the levitation spell and were secretly working on transfigurations.

Christmas came, with parties, visits, and presents. Once more there was a big game of exploding snap at Sirius' house, and Draco enjoyed himself even more. He did take some time to get Harry, Neville, and Luna alone again.

"I just wanted to subtly remind you that pure-bloods are the best sorts of witches and wizards."

"Why are you doing this, Draco? You know we aren't going to accept that, especially the way you're trying to persuade us," Neville told him.

"I know. But I have to. After the last time we flew together, my father asked if I had been trying to get you to the pure-blood camp. He used a truth detector spell, so I had to tell him that I hadn't. I did make up the excuse that we were closely supervised by your Gran and your father," he indicated Neville and Luna. "But I had to tell him about the other time I told you. I had to tell the truth."

"What did you tell him?" Harry asked, a bit suspicious.

Draco smiled. "I told him that Luna would like to overthrow the Ministry because she thinks it would be fun, and that you weren't going to believe me until you met some Muggle-born witches and wizards and saw for yourself. He said that Luna would probably be in Gryffindor, and you would probably be in Ravenclaw. And I told him that you didn't say anything, Neville, so he thinks you might be in Slytherin House, because you're keeping your feelings to yourself."

"Are you being cunning, Neville?" Harry asked.

"Uh, no, I don't think so. I just figured that since Draco was trying so hard not to persuade us, there wasn't anything for me to say. After all, nobody was accepting it, not even Draco, so there wasn't any reason to argue against it."

"And Luna's leaping before she looks! A very Gryffindor trait. No offense Luna, but they do have a reputation for stupidity."

"None taken, Draco, since I'm not in any house yet. I reserve the right to hex you for that remark in a few years, though, if I do end up in Gryffindor House."

"Ah, but I'll be in Slytherin, and cunningly soothe you with my words, and make you realize that it would be dishonorable for you to do so."

"What about you, Neville? Where do you think you'll end up?"

"I don't know. My Gran wants me to be in Gryffindor like my Dad, but I think I'd rather be with friends any day. I'd never go on an adventure like you did to the sea shore. But I'd go with any of you anywhere. I think that sounds more like Hufflepuff."

Draco said, "I better not tell my father that. He's never said a good word about Hufflepuff." He eyed Neville shrewdly. "You know, a Slytherin would say something like that to throw others off. I think Harry's right, you're being very cunning, Neville. If nothing else, you're too smart for Gryffindor." They all started laughing at that. About that time Ron found them.

"Hi, guys! Whatcha doing?"

"Talking about Hogwart's houses," Harry answered.

"Oh, that's easy, Griffindor's the best house, of course. All my family ends up there." For some reason, the other children thought that was very funny.

- - -

"Draco."

"Yes, father."

"Did you talk to your friends?"

"Yes, father?"

"Did you have any success?"

"It's hard to say, father. None of them really said much about it, but Harry's not convinced. Neville, though. . . ."

"What about Longbottom?"

"He indicated that he knew what I was up to the other time we talked, and purposefully kept his opinions to himself. Soon after, the conversation changed to Hogwarts houses. Harry didn't object when I said he would probably be a Ravenclaw. Luna didn't seem to care, but joked about being a Slytherin in such a way that I'm sure she won't. Neville objected to being in Gryffindor. . . ."

"Hmmm, he did, did he?"

"And then talked about being in Hufflepuff."

"Bah!"

"But the thing is, earlier in the conversation, Harry had talked about how cunning Neville was. And I was thinking, if I came from a family with Gryffindor ties, I might not want to be known as a Slytherin until I was away from home."

"Hmmm, that may be. Well, we shall see. Keep watching when you are with them. Maybe one of them will be useful."

"Yes, father."

- - -

Valentine's Day came around, and Luna and Harry got into a fight over who would make who breakfast in bed. Then they went to Larry and Selene to work it out.

"Normally, Harry, I'd say you were right," Larry told him, when they were talking alone. "But there's a rule of marriage that you should learn; even when you're right, she's right."

"Huh?"

"It's easier if you don't fight her over little things. If it doesn't matter, then it's not worth worrying about. If you don't make her breakfast in bed, does that mean you don't love her?"

"No."

"And that's what this is all about, isn't it? Showing her you love her, right? Well, if it's not important to the goal, then don't get into a big fight about it."

"OK."

Meanwhile, Selene and Luna were having their own conversation.

"If he wants to do something nice for you, let him. Then you surprise him at a later date with. Choose your fights. Fighting over who does something nice is silly. If you're going to fight, fight over something important."

Luna and Harry then got into an argument over who was wrong as they each tried to apologize and let the other make breakfast.

- - -

Luna's tenth birthday party was quieter, as Selene and Larry had arranged before hand to take the family out for dinner that night.

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump, etc., made his way through the corridors to the Deputy Headmistress' office, on a bright June morning. He entered, feeling apprehensive. There was the tiniest chance of success, and he wanted to see it. Hope springs eternal in the human breast, and with the same hope that drives people to buy lottery tickets, he sat down across from Professor McGonagall. She looked at him, and he nodded. She placed a set of parchments on the desk, and a stack of envelopes. She opened a bottle of ink, and produced a beautiful, inlaid, wooden box. She opened it, and took out a quill pen. After tapping it with her wand, it rose up, dipped its end in

the ink, and began writing, inviting Hannah Abbott to the school. Once it was done, it addressed an envelope. The Headmistress took the letter, put it in the envelope along with a list of school supplies, and set it aside. The quill was most of the way through the next letter.

Student by student it continued, slowly getting closer to the name they were waiting for. But Sally-Anne Perks was not followed by Potter.

Albus Dumbledore, Order of Merlin First Class, etc, got up sadly. He gave his deputy headmistress a nod, and walked slowly back to his office.

He took down the sorting hat, glancing at the portraits of all the other headmasters, and decided to not have this conversation out loud. He placed the sorting hat on his head.

"Greetings, Headmaster. Do you need me to sort you again?"

"No, but I do have a request for the sorting that will be happening this fall."

"This is highly unusual. You are asking me to go against my charge to sort people where they belong. If you are asking, then I'm pretty sure that you want someone where you think they don't belong."

"Well, yes. But it's important. Neville Longbottom must be in Gryffindor house to learn courage so that he may someday face Lord Voldemort -- Awww! For crying out loud, don't you shake when someone says his name, too!"

"I don't think you realize what you are asking. Someone who shouldn't be in Gryffindor will have what little courage they possess teased out of them, unless they are lucky. Gryffindors feel that they have the right to shame their less courageous house mates into doing stupid actions because they claim it's brave. You really should teach them real bravery -- going against peer pressure, befriending Slytherins, taking Ancient Runes, acting even when you're afraid. These things take courage.

"And speaking of Ancient Runes, are the rumors true? You've replaced Professor Quirrell?"

"I had to. Either I got him a different job, or I sacked him. You just can't teach students ancient, magical incantations with a stutter. We'll have a new instructor for AR and Professor Quirrell will take over as DADA instructor."

"You would think, after all these DADA instructors, at least one of them would have been well enough versed in the subject to dispell the curse on that job."

The headmaster sighed and removed the hat.

- - -

"I got it! I got my letter!" Ron ran to the living room, where Harry and Luna were brushing off the soot from floo-ing over. It was Friday, and Larry and Selene were working, so, as usual, Luna and Harry spent the day at the Weasleys'.

"What letter?" Harry asked.

"My Hogwarts letter. I've been accepted. I'm going to Hogwarts in the fall!"

"That's good?" Harry asked.

"Good! It's only the best Wizarding School in Europe. Probably the world."

"Oh. I hear Beauxbaton's Academy is good."

"Harry! They're foreigners! What kind of education do you think you'd get there?"

"Well, I was just sort of saying that there are other places. . . ."

"You just can't improve on Hogwarts."

"But it's such a big school. We were thinking about a smaller school, with more personal time from the teacher. The Poppins Institute looks really good, and they specialize in household charms."

Ron stared at Harry with his mouth hanging open.

Luna started snorting, which caused Harry to lose control. He started laughing, and couldn't stop for several minutes. He was literally on the floor, because he was laughing too hard to stand. Ginny started laughing when Luna did, not sure of the extent of the joke, but enjoying the look on Ron's face. When the twins showed up to find out what was so funny, Ron stomped off. As Harry calmed down, Luna explained what happened.

"He told Ron that we'd be learning magic from Mary Poppins."

"Who's Mary Poppins?"

"A witch from a book we read; she was hired as a nanny."

With that Ginny got the reference to household charms, and started laughing again.

Ron eventually forgave Harry -- sometime around lunch, because his mother was going to send him to his room without it unless he started acting nice to the Lovegoods. Harry also apologized, and then congratulated Ron.

- - -

Harry and Luna went with the Weasleys to Diagon Alley. They met Draco there, and the smile that lit up his face when he saw Harry and Luna was observed by his mother. She talked politely with Mrs. Weasley for a few minutes while the ten and 11 year olds talked excitedly about the coming year. Ginny was a little jealous about Ron going, but Harry told the group that he was glad that he would have friends who could show him around when he got there.

They also met the biggest man Harry had ever seen. Mrs. Weasley was walking behind the crowd of kids, trying to make sure nobody (ie.

the twins) went off on their own, when a deep, pleasant voice boomed out, "Hello, Molly!"

"Hagrid! How are you?"

"Jus' fine, Molly. How many do I 'ave ter keep out of the Forbidd'n Fores' this year?"

"Just four. Ron goes for the first time this year. Ron, this is Rubeus Hagrid, grounds keeper of Hogwarts. The twins --GET BACK HERE, FRED AND GEORGE! -- will be back, along with Percy here."

"Hello, Mr. Hagrid."

"Please, just call me Hagrid. An' there seems ter be a few more here."

"Ginny you met when she was just a baby, and these are Harry and Luna Lovegood. All three have another year to wait before they get into trouble."

"Pleased ter mee'cha."

"Please, sir, what's the Forbidden Forest?" Harry asked.

"It's the magic fores' near Hogwarts. It's a lot safer than the rumors make it out ter be. But it's still no place for a student who doesn't know what he might encounter. Well, some of yer I'll see in a few days. Now I've got to be off ter Gringotts; Hogwarts business, you know. Nice to meet all of yer!"

- - -

"Harry!"

"What, Luna."

"One of the lines, it's moved."

"Really? Let me get the map, and we'll check it out."

"OK, move your head a little more. That's about right. It's the one that wasn't in England. The others seem to be the same, but that one is pointing the same as this one. Didn't Daddy say that that was Hogwarts?"

"Yes. Next year we might be able to get two of them."

"If it stays there. We'll just have to see."

- - -

The door to the compartment slid open.

"Have you seen a toad? This boy has lost one."

"Oh, hi Neville!"

"Hi Ron. This is Hermione, she's helping me find my toad."

"Hello. I'll help too. Where did you look?"

- - -

The door to the compartment slid open again. Neville grabbed Trevor before he hopped out again.

"Hello, Draco," Ron and Neville said.

"Hi Ron, Neville. This is Crabbe and this is Goyle. Why don't you two go back to the compartment, I'll be along later."

"Draco, this is Hermione. She's a Muggle-born."

"Really? Harry would like to meet you."

"Hello. Who is Harry?"

"Friend of ours. He's too young to come to Hogwarts this year. He'll be along next year."

"Why would he want to meet me?"

"I was telling him about my father's beliefs that pure-bloods are the best witches and wizards. Harry wanted to see if it was true."

"According to Hogwarts, A History, there's no overall difference in grades between Muggle-born and magical born."

"That's interesting. I'll have to tell Harry."

"Hey Draco, who were those two with you?"

"Crabbe and Goyle? Would you believe it? My father wants them to act as my body guards! As if I can't protect myself!"

"Can you protect yourself?" Hermione asked.

Draco laughed, "Probably not from anyone bigger than I am. But I'm going to school, not a riot! Anyway, have you been around the train yet?"

"We've been in this car and the next, looking for Neville's toad."

Draco looked at the toad and said, "Nice toad, Neville. Very traditional, good choice. But have any of you heard the rumors that Harry Potter's supposed to be on this train? We were sort of looking for him. My father wants me to befriend him. But all I get are rumors. As far as I know, he's not on the train."

"Harry Potter! The one who defeated the Dark Lord that they won't print his name? Let me see, nineteen minus nineteen cancels out, and ninety-one minus eighty-one and he was one at the time, then, yes, he should be on this train! Where is he?"

"That seems to be the question everyone is asking. As far as I can tell, he's not here. Well, if you find him, or hear anything, I'm one car back. See you at Hogwarts."

"What a strange boy. I think there's something going on about him, the way he was talking."

"Yes, you're right," said Neville. "He's caught between his father and what's right. His father is a pure-blood bigot. Draco can't go against that, but he doesn't want to go with it, either. He's a good guy, though. Just have to give him some leeway about that, though."

Ron stared at Neville. All this was news to him.

"Well, we should get our robes on, we're getting close."

- - -

"Granger, Hermione."

She sat on the stool and put on the sorting hat. Suddenly, she heard another voice in her head.

"Hmmm, an excellent mind. And a real drive to prove yourself. You would do well in Ravenclaw where they would support your academic endeavors. Or you could learn how to channel your ambition in Slytherin house. Where's the deciding factor?"

"But Gryffindor is the best house. Lots of great witches and wizards came from there, and that's the headmaster's house."

"Lots of great witches and wizards came from all the houses. I'll admit that a lot of the more famous came from Gryffindor. . . ."

"Then put me in Gryffindor, please."

"Desire is part of the deciding factor, but I'm telling you, it's a mistake. GRYFFINDOR!"

- - -

"Longbottom, Neville."

"What have we got here? Your father and mother were in Gryffindor. Shall I follow family tradition?"

"I'm not sure. That doesn't seem like a good enough reason to put me there."

"It actually is a good enough reason. When Mr. Weasley comes up, that will be his reasoning."

"You know that already?"

"Well, not know. . . ."

"But from his brothers, you deduce it."

"Yes. You have a sharp mind. Maybe not Ravenclaw quality, but there's more to intelligence than book learning. You might do well in Slytherin. But I think if things don't work out for you, you should ask for a transfer to Hufflepuff."

"If things don't work out for me? Why wouldn't they. . . ."

"GRYFFINDOR!"

- - -

"Malfoy, Draco."

"Well, well, well. What a dilemma."

"What dilemma? Just put me in Slytherin."

"And while you have a fine Slytherin mind, you would benefit more from Ravenclaw. You are probably as cunning as you need to be, so filling this mind with information to be cunning about would probably be the best choice. But what's this? Your happiest memories are having fun with friends. Hufflepuff would certainly supply you with loyal friends."

"NO! Not Hufflepuff. My father would disown me before allowing that to stand."

"Your subterfuge against your father takes courage. Gryffindor is open to you."

"Are you kidding? That's almost as bad as Hufflepuff. Now will you stop arguing and just put me in"

"Very well, SLYTHERIN!"

- - -

"Weasley, Ronald."

"GRYFFINDOR!"

- - -

"Godfather?"

"Yes, Draco."

"Is it really necessary to insult Neville Longbottom like that?"

"He is a menace. You saw what happened to his cauldron."

"And why did you take points from Weasley."

"Because he should have seen what Longbottom was doing and stopped it."

"Did you see what Longbottom was doing wrong?"

"Of course."

"Then why didn't you stop it."

"Are you questioning me?"

"Yes. I'd heard that you were a great potions professor, but it seems you're not."

"How dare you! What he was doing was dangerous."

"Then how dare you not stop it when you saw it. And how dare you punish someone else for not doing what you didn't do."

"Your father will hear of this."

"That won't change the fact that I'm ashamed of you."

"Get out before I take points from you!"

- - -

Even though they didn't get together very often, Harry felt Neville and Draco's absence, along with Ron's. Of course, they missed Ron every Friday at the Weasleys'. Selene turned his feelings into penmanship and grammar lessons, forcing the kids to write to their friends at Hogwarts every week. That helped the feelings pass. And they enjoyed the return letters from Neville and Draco. Ron wrote once, but mostly didn't reply to his mail.

- - -

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," said

Madam Hooch. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come

straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle -- three

-- two --"

But Neville's broom didn't wait for the whistle. It bucked, which made Neville lean back, which told the broom to go higher.

"Mr. Longbottom! You come back here this instant!"

"I can't! It's not responding!" And indeed the broom was doing a side to side motion that was extremely difficult if not impossible to force it to do. It then gave a violent jerk, and Neville found neither of his hands on the broomstick.

Malfoy kicked off, aiming right at Neville, who was only about fifteen feet up. He reached the other boy in almost no time, and steadied him. Neville was slightly below Draco and had one hand on Draco's broom, while Draco had one hand under Neville's arm. Suddenly the broom Neville was on dropped from beneath him. He got the other hand on Draco's broom, and the Slytherin quickly brought him down before his grip gave out.

"Five points to Slytherin. Let me see that broom. I must apologize, Mr. Longbottom. Some of these school brooms should have been replaced years ago. This one has given up the ghost, and is nothing more than a cleaning instrument now. Class will be dismissed until I have checked the safety of all these brooms."

- - -

Dear Harry,

School is interesting. I think you'll like it. I suppose you heard that Ron and Neville got sorted into Gryffindor. I'm guessing Luna will end up there, too. Some of the stories you guys tell!

Slytherin isn't what I hoped. There are a lot of people here who sound like my father. If you ignore that, then they're not so bad.

I found you a Muggle-born. She's also in Gryffindor, but probably should be in Ravenclaw. She's probably the smartest witch in our class. I'll introduce you when you come next year. If I thought it would do any good I'd introduce her to my father. Slytherins are supposed to be smart, not ignore facts. If that's what being "pure-blood" is all about, he can have it.

We had flying lessons. Madam Hooch was the instructor. The brooms are garbage. I can't wait until next year when I can bring my own broom. Stupid rules.

Your friend,

Draco

- - -

"She's a horror! No wonder no one can stand her!"

Hermione bumped Ron, as she moved quickly past.

"I think she heard you," Neville said.

"So? She must have noticed she's got no friends."

- - -

"Troll! Troll in the dungeon! Thought you'd like to know."

During the chaos that followed that announcement, Neville found himself near the door with Draco.

"Hermione's in the girl's bathroom. She doesn't know about the troll."

"I suppose it's a Gryffindor thing to rescue her?" Draco asked, rolling his eyes.

"No, I think it's more Hufflepuff," Neville answered with a grin.

As soon as they were out of the hall, they raced up the steps and headed for the bathroom. As they neared it they heard a scream. Racing into the bathroom, they saw Hermione sitting against the far wall, the troll between them and her.

"Congratulations, you found it," drawled Draco. "Step two?"

"Distract it," Neville said, grabbing a broken chunk of sink and throwing it at the troll. The pipe that Draco threw hit it in the ear, which seemed to get its attention. It turned to the two boys, raising its club.

"Step two worked perfectly. I hope step three does, also."

"Let's try to get it to follow us out of here."

"Great, make it mad at us. I love this plan!"

They continued to throw debris at the troll, which started to move towards them. They backed into the hall, and the troll stopped. The boys looked around. There was no damage out here; nothing to throw. The troll started to turn back towards Hermione. Neville reached in his pocket and pulled a small glass ball out of it. It immediately started filling with red smoke.

"Hey! Olog!" The troll turned its head to the noise, and Neville threw the Rememberall at it. It hit the troll right in the eye, breaking, and getting glass and magical ingredients in it. The troll yelled, and put its hands over its damaged eye. It snarled and turned towards the boys.

Draco said, quickly, "Hey, I know step 5! Run!" Draco and Neville raced down the halls. The troll was rather like an avalanche, starting slowly, but building momentum.

"Good throw, by the way."

"Thanks. Quiff pays off!"

"You do know it's gaining," Draco gasped between gulping breaths.

"Yes, and I've figured out step 6. The Charms Hall."

"Want to clue me in on why?" Draco asked, as they reached a T in the halls, and headed right. The troll almost missed the turn. Actually, it slammed into the wall, absorbing the impact with its hands and arms, then headed after the boys.

"Did you think that would stop it?"

"Actually, I didn't think of that at all. Would have been nice."

"It's gaining again."

"Just have to reach the east wing first."

"Should be possible. Only there's not much escape once we get there. Uh, here. Oh! Hope this works."

As the charms hall reached the east wing of the castle the architecture changed. The tall, rounded ceiling gave way to a hall with different stone work, sconces, and columns, but most importantly with a flat ceiling, several feet lower than the earlier part of the hall. The troll, once again at full momentum and covering a lot more distance per step than the boys, ran right into the lintel where the ceiling suddenly became lower.

There was a crash, and a shower of stone falling, followed by a troll hitting the floor with a boom. It lay there, not moving.

"Step 7, figure out what to tell the professors when they ask," Draco said.

"Any reason not to tell the truth?"

"None that I can see. We might lose some points, but we might gain some, too. Let's see."

They started walking back the way they came.

"Hufflepuff, huh?"

"I think so."

- - -

"Aunt Selene?"

"Yes, Harry."

"Are we sure we want to go to Hogwarts? Draco and Neville just fought a troll."

"Don't be silly. You don't fight trolls at Hogwarts."

"Mum, read the paper."

"Meddwyn! Draco and Neville?"

"Yes."

"All I can say is that the curriculum has changed a lot since my day."

- - -

Dear Harry,

Hey, Mate! Sorry I haven't written more. This place is amazing. It's the biggest castle I've ever seen, and it's in working order. It's got everything, secret passages, ghosts, more food than even my Mum makes! Gryffindor is the best house, we got some great people here. Next year I hope you get sorted here. Take care,

Ron

- - -

"Miss Granger. Mr. Longbottom. Lemon drop?"

"No thank you, Headmaster," Hermione said. Neville just shook his head, too nervous to talk.

"Good work on the troll, by the way. That was excellent thinking on your part, Mr. Longbottom. Your parents would be proud."

"Th...thank you, sir."

"Now, to what do I owe this visit?"

"It says in Hogwarts, a History that a student can request a transfer to a different house if they feel that the original sorting was in error. We would like to transfer houses."

"But my dear, I don't believe any error has been made. Your courageous battle with the troll has proven your Gryffindor character."

"All I did was cower in the corner. I should have listened to the Sorting Hat and let it put me in Ravenclaw as it wanted."

"I see. I'll agree to this. But you, Neville! From what Mr. Malfoy said, it was your plan that killed the troll. Certainly you see that you are Gryffindor material. I would have to say your actions show that you are more Gryffindor than any other student in your house. And to be honest, I don't think your grades are up to Ravenclaw standards."

"No, sir. It wasn't courage that made me do what I did. As I told Draco, it was loyalty to my friend. I want to transfer to Hufflepuff house, please."

The Headmaster started coughing. Once he got control, he said, "I don't know, Neville. The Hat put you into Gryffindor for a purpose."

"But it also offered Hufflepuff and Slytherin."

The Headmaster suddenly choked on his lemon drop.

- - -

Dear Harry,

Thanks for letter. Yes, we're OK. No, we didn't really want to fight the troll. Yes, we did save someone. Draco says he's told you about Hermione Granger. She's the one we saved. No, we weren't trying to kill it. I was expecting at most to knock it out, but at least to get to a part of the castle where it couldn't chase us as easily. If there are going to be more trolls, I think I'll switch schools. What was the name of that place in France you teased Ron with?

But I've got Big News! I changed houses. Hermione found students could do that. I am now in Hufflepuff. There are some great people here, and no one teases me. They try to help me remember my things and remind me to get my homework done. It's great, a lot friendlier than Gryffindor. And the twins aren't short sheeting my bed every few days. (At least I think it was them.)

Draco says the people in Slytherin talk down Hufflepuff, but he knows me, so he doesn't do it when I'm around. But we've been talking about studying together, since we all have the same classes even if not together.

Looking forward to seeing you during the break.

Your friend,

Neville

- - -

"Merry Christmas, Draco!"

"Merry Christmas, Harry, Luna!"

"Fought a troll, huh. Aunt Selene says she doesn't remember anyone fighting trolls when she was in school."

"I'm sure Granger could tell you the last time a student fought a troll at Hogwarts."

"Who's Granger?"

"She's a Muggle-born, Harry. She's the one you want to meet to prove that pure-bloods aren't the best. She's got to be the smartest witch in our class. Doesn't fly very well, though."

"Well, then, what are you going to say to your father?"

"Nothing. Nothing I say will change him, and it will only get me in trouble. So I'll keep "working" on you so I can truthfully tell him that."

"OK. Uh-oh. Here comes Ron. Time for a change of subject."

"Hi guys! Merry Christmas. What are you talking about?"

Draco buffed his finger nails against his shirt and answered, "How the Slytherin/Gryffindor Quidditch match went."

Ron turned red.

Luna cut in, "Actually, we were talking about fathers. Draco's is strict, mine is happy-go-lucky; what's yours like, Ron?" And Ron was defused.

- - -

"Harry?"

"Yes, Luna?"

"What did you think when Ginny said she was going to marry you? You didn't say anything."

"She didn't say she was going to marry me. She said she was going to marry Harry Potter."

"But that's you."

"No, I'm Harry Lovegood. It even says so on the documents your Mum and Dad signed. If she ever wanted to marry me, well, then I'd have something to say. She wants to marry a superhero who never really existed."

"You know if she ever finds out that you used to be Harry Potter, she'd want to marry you."

"She wants to marry someone named 'Harry Potter.' If the ugliest man in the world turned up with that name, she'd want to marry him. That's just silly. You don't marry names. You marry people; and she's

not interested in me as a person. And I'm already married to you. And nothing she can do will change that."

"I'm glad. But I wonder if there are other girls out there who want to marry Harry Potter?"

"Maybe. But they'll have to marry someone else. I'm taken."

"Thank you, Harry."

"Thank you, Luna."

- - -

"'ello, 'ermione, Ron, Neville, Draco. Can't talk, very busy. Thanks for dropping by, but we'll have ter talk some other time." He turned and looked in his house, and growled, "Bloody hell, not my chair, again!" and moved quickly away from the door. The four first years poked their heads in and saw him extinguishing the fire that was consuming his chair. Something right behind him let loose a jet of flame at his backside. He quickly got the chair and his pants put out, scooped up the lizard-like creature, and deposited him in a large stone basin.

"Hagrid, was that a dragon?" Hermione asked.

"That weren't just a dragon, but a Norwegian Ridgeback," Ron put in.

"Cool! But dangerous," Neville said.

"Naw! You just have to know how ter handle him. 'e's just a baby, after all."

Draco looked around the hut. He had visited several times before with Hermione, Ron, and Neville. He thought Hagrid strange, but a nice enough person. He knew what his father thought of him, but enjoyed the visits. It was funny listening to the other kids' excuses for not eating Hagrid's rock cakes. Hagrid was ... rustic, that was the word ... and wouldn't fit in at Malfoy Manor, but that was OK. The world was bigger than the Manor, Draco had found out.

"You know," he drawled, "It seems a little dangerous trying to raise any sort of fire breathing creature in a wooden house."

Hagrid looked around, seeming to notice that little drawback for the first time.

"Hmmm, maybe you're right."

The children eventually convinced him to contact Ron's brother Charlie and see if he couldn't get it to the dragon preserve where he worked. They assumed Hagrid must have done it, because they never saw the dragon at Hagrid's house again.

- - -

"I can see myself with the stone! How do I get it?"

"You don't. Professor Quirrell, I'm very disappointed in you.

"Dumbledore! You're supposed to be at the Ministry of Magic!"

"Yes, well, I didn't think it prudent to leave at this particular time."

"Give me the Philosopher's Stone!"

"I'm very sorry, Professor, but it's not here."

"NOT HERE! Then what are all these traps and tests for?"

"They were for capturing you. Surely you realized that a group of determined first years could have gotten through those barriers. I mean, really, expecting a fungus that hates light and heat to stop someone? Or putting the key in the room with the locked door. If I really wanted you to stay out, I would have kept the key in my pocket."

"But where is the Stone!"

"It is someplace truly safe. And now, as Chief Warlock, I place you under arrest."

"NO! You can't! My master won't let you!"

"I'm sure the Dark Lord can do without you. . . ."

"Ha! He can't!" Quirrell started taking off his turban. Dumbledore watched until he saw the face on the back of Quirrell's head in the Mirror.

"Tom! I wasn't expecting to catch you, too. This is an unexpected bonus."

"You fool, Dumbledore. You haven't caught me!" Suddenly, something came out of Quirrell, and sped away. It wasn't totally substantial, but it wasn't insubstantial, either. It knocked down the Mirror as it went past. Then it sped through a crack in the wall. Dumbledore was caught completely unprepared.

He spoke to Quirrell, "Well, it seems your master doesn't care if you are captured."

But Quirrell made no answer. He stood perfectly still, staring at Dumbledore, unblinking. Then Dumbledore noticed that he wasn't even breathing. He gently touched the former Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and the body collapsed, revealing a hole in the back of the former defense teacher's head.

Dumbledore sighed. He may have won the battle, but the war wasn't over. And he needed a new defense teacher.

- - -

"Harry. It's moved again."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know. Probably still in Britain, but no longer at Hogwarts. I think it's with the one we couldn't get to near Hangleton, in the Lake District."

"If it stays there, once we learn how to get past wards, we'll get two of them, then."

"Yes, but it's taking a long time to learn."

"That's alright. It's fun learning with you."

"You say the sweetest things."

- - -

"We better say our goodbyes here. I don't want a scene with my father."

"Yes. Well, it's been an interesting year -- magic, trolls, dragons! This time last year I didn't know a thing about any of those."

"And now you're top of the class. We'll write, and try to get together during the summer. The Lovegoods and Croakers have had us over, and it's rather fun."

"I'll need to get an owl, I think. You don't have telephones, do you?"

"No."

"Honestly, I don't understand the wizarding world sometimes. Goodbye, Draco. Goodbye, Neville. And thank you again for saving me from the troll."

- - - - -

Notes Chapter 7

Excerpt from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

Next Chapter: Harry does Hogwarts

Chapter 8 Harry Does Hogwarts

"Hello, Cissi!"

"Hello, Selene."

"So, why the change of plans? You know you're very welcome at the Meadow. The kids could play outside. Sirius has done wonderful things with the house. . . ."

"More than you know. You probably wouldn't want to see what it was like when we were growing up."

"But there isn't any place for the kids to run around outside."

"No, but Draco insisted that another friend from school join. She's a Muggle-born, and despite his father's feelings, he befriended her. I don't know if it's puppy love, or what, but I've been trying to teach him to think for himself and not become a cold, manipulative, arrogant, bas. . . er, wizard like his father. So I'll do anything I can to support him when he does think for himself."

"Not that I'm being nosy, but is he why the kids don't go to your place?"

"Yes. Harry's mixed blood, isn't he?"

"Uh, yes. I believe his mother was a Muggle."

"Well, I'd hate to hear the abuse my husband would heap on him if he found out."

"I think he could do without that, too. Are you and Lucius. . . ?"

"We get along civilly, as long as I don't disagree."

"I'm sorry."

"It's too late for sorry. Besides, I'm Slytherin. We always turn situations to our best advantage."

"There's the bell. With most people floo-ing in, I don't think I've ever heard it before. Let's go meet Draco's friend and her family."

Narcissa said, "You make it sound like it's serious."

Selene answered with a smile, "No, he's upstairs, last I checked."

"AAARRRGGGG! I can't tell you how many times I heard that joke growing up. I'm afraid I'm going to have to hurt you if you do that again."

- - -

"Harry, this is Hermione Granger, the one I wrote to you about. Hermione, this is Harry and Luna Lovegood, my friends."

"I'm pleased to meet you."

"So tell us about the troll!"

"I am so sick of talking about the troll, Luna! If I never hear about it again, that would be too soon!"

"I get the impression he doesn't want to talk about it, Luna. Hello Hermione. That's an interesting name."

"My mother named me after a character from Shakespeare. I can guess where your parents got your name."

"You can?"

"I bet there are a lot of boys named Harry in your year."

"Why?"

"Named after Harry Potter."

"Oh. I don't know. My parents died when I was a baby, so I can't ask them."

"I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago. So, want to do something?"

"Like what?"

Both boys answered at the same time, "Exploding snap!"

- - -

Neville and his grandmother arrived soon after, and the parents/guardians visited while the children played snap. Sirius joined the children at play, mumbling something about "women's talk."

Meanwhile the adult women were getting to know each other. They were a diverse group, the aristocrat, the researcher, the grandmother, and the Muggle, but they all loved their children and wanted what was best for them. Each of them felt that their children were helped by having friends; Draco because of the solemnness of their museum-like home; Neville, because he was surrounded by people Augusta's age or older, he never got to be a child; Hermione because she had been ostracized for being a bookworm; and Harry and Luna, because Selene thought they tended to be too exclusive with each other.

The disappointment the children expressed when the visit was over was proof that it had been a good day. As Muggles the Grangers couldn't get their fireplace hooked up to the floo network (permanently) but Selene thought that something could be worked out to allow them to visit the Meadow.

After the Grangers drove off, Draco asked Harry and Luna, "Well, what did you think? Most of us are pure-bloods, you're a mixed blood, and she's a Muggle-born. Any difference?"

"She's a girl."

"Hey!" Luna exclaimed, punching Harry in the arm.

Harry laughed, and added, "No, nothing obvious. I'll take your word about how smart she is. She didn't catch on to snap very quickly."

"I think she was trying to copy Luna's style of play, and it wasn't working. I still can't figure out how you almost never lose," Draco said.

Luna shrugged, "I can tell which cards are going to heat up before they start. I just pass them on."

"How can you know that?"

"Magic," she said, and walked away.

"Is she always like that, Harry?" Neville wanted to know.

"No. Sometimes she's crazy."

- - -

The next Friday Harry told Ron about the get-together. Ron didn't have anything nice to say about Hermione, but Luna vigorously defended her. As she later told Ginny, "We could use a few more girls in our circle of friends." Harry didn't so much defend Hermione as express displeasure that Ron would talk about anyone the way he was doing. That made him drop the topic.

- - -

Once more Larry's hopes to search the northern countries of Europe for Crumpled Horn Snorkacks were vetoed by Selene. The Lovegoods invested in a few more magical language courses and learned modern French and Late Latin. They then spent two weeks mostly in Paris. They visited more museums than Harry could count.

They saw an opera (The Magic Flute) and Harry enjoyed that a lot more than the one he had seen in Germany.

Selene would not let Luna try to find the way to the roof of the Notre Dame cathedral to find out why one of the gargoyles was glowing with magic. Harry calmed her curiosity with a whispered "Someday."

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump, etc, sat across from the Minister of Magic.

"This is impossible, Dumbledore. He's been dead for ten years, and now you're telling me he's trying to come back?"

"Not dead, Minister. He wasn't dead, he never died, and now he's trying to get a body back. One way of doing it is using the Elixir of Life. I finally got Flamel to agree to destroy the Stone before Voldemort finds it for real."

"But where's your proof!"

"I saw him with my own eyes. That's my proof."

"Eyewitness accounts are notoriously inaccurate. Why just this last Quibbler it recounts eyewitnesses who claim Harry Potter was in Paris. The author of the article was there at the time, but found no trace of anyone with a lightning bolt scar. You just can't trust eyewitnesses, Dumbledore."

The eyewitness in question put his palm to his face and asked, "What would it take for you to accept that he's out there trying to come back?"

"I'd have to see it with my own eyes."

Dumbledore shook his head, and left. Maybe it was time for a new minister of magic.

- - -

Summer seemed to speed by even though Selene let up on the kids' lessons. She was letting them enjoy their last taste of freedom (within limits). There were several more visits with Draco, Neville and Hermione. Selene floo-ed to the Leaky Cauldron to bring them back through the floo network to her house. Mrs. Granger (or any Muggle)

could use it as long as she was accompanied by a witch or wizard. Ginny, Luna, and Hermione hit it off, even though Hermione wasn't interested in playing Quidditch. Luna wasn't either, but she enjoyed flying, which Hermione didn't. After flying (or not, depending on preference) in the morning, the group ate at the Weasley's then went to the Lovegoods' for an afternoon of Quiff. Hermione enjoyed that a lot more than flying.

Harry and Luna had a long conversation with the Ravenclaw. Harry had to admit that she was very smart. She disputed Draco's suggestion that she was the smartest witch in their class; she admitted that she was slower at getting spells to work than some of the other Ravenclaws. Her own theory was that the students who grew up with magic had an advantage in the practical aspects of spell casting. Draco still insisted that she was the smartest witch in their year, even if she didn't get the spells first. Hermione blushed at the compliment, and Ron rolled his eyes.

The parents/guardians were happy to see their children enjoying themselves and promised to get together again. Mrs. Granger and Mrs. Malfoy found that they had something in common -- their husbands were annoyingly interested in tradition and tried to enforce it in the household. Mrs. Granger admitted that her husband's "Stiff upper lip" and "We shall do this the British way!" didn't quite compare to Mr. Malfoy's hatred of anything not pure-blood, but they could see the same faults in each other's husbands. Selene was reminded of something she once heard, "Friendship starts the moment you say, 'I didn't know anyone else felt that way.'" She was also quietly glad that Larry was the way he was.

Harry discussed the various houses with each of the Hogwarts students. Knowing that he could change houses if he was incorrectly sorted made him feel better about the whole house business. Luna didn't really care -- she was going for an education, and felt she could get along with anyone. Draco warned Harry that that wasn't true; that there were people in several of the houses that would take advantage of someone as good-natured as Luna and not care if she was hurt. Harry nodded and grumbled when he couldn't get any of the other students to tell him about the actual sorting. It was a tradition to keep it a secret. He did come to a conclusion about houses, though.

- - -

"Daddy! We got mail. I got my letter!"

"That's wonderful, water lily!"

"Have you seen Harry? He has a letter too."

"He was just in the yard a moment ago."

"I'll go find him."

"HARRY!"

"Over here, Luna!"

Luna ran into the back yard, jumped the stream, and went a short way into the woods. "Harry! You have. . . . Hello. Who is this?"

"Luna, this is Willow. Willow, this is Luna. Mrs. Slither told me that there was someone else who could talk to snakes, so I came out to see who."

Luna looked at the strange toddler and said, "Hello, Willow. Are you out in the woods all alone? And naked?" She also noticed the green snake from the garden, and waved, "Hello Mrs. Slither."

The little girl answered with a voice older than she appeared. "I'm not all alone. I'm with you and Harry, and all the trees, and the snake and the salamander over there, and those birds, and the moss, and the insects."

Luna commented to Harry, "She has quite a vocabulary for such a small child."

"Luna, she's not a child. This is the spirit of the tree that the Dryad gave us."

"Oh. Well, I'm very glad to meet you. That must be why you're green. And you can talk to snakes, too?"

"I can talk to anything. It's just not everything can talk back. Most insects and plants don't have anything interesting to say. Most of the mammals I've talked to go on and on about their babies."

"What about the birds? They seem to have a lot to say."

"No, they just say the same thing over and over again. Usually it's 'This is my place, stay away.' But sometimes they say, 'Hey girls, prime catch, come and get some.' But there's an awful lot of, 'Oh what a beautiful morning.' They may have brains the size of peas, but they certainly don't use it to have any interesting conversations."

"Do snakes say more?" Luna, never having talked to any of these animals (or at least not had a conversation with them) was curious. What the young Dryad had said made sense. Most animals, she supposed, didn't have much of a varied life from day to day and thus wouldn't have much to talk about. Yet Harry seemed to have long conversations with snakes.

"Oh, yes," Willow answered. "That's the magic of Parseltongue. It not only enchants you to talk with the snakes, but gives them the power to have intelligent conversations."

"I wish I could speak to the snakes," Luna complained.

"I could teach you," Willow offered.

"You can teach me Parseltongue?"

"No. I can teach you an incantation that will give you the power of Parseltongue so you can speak to the snakes or any reptile. Ready?"

"YES!"

"SSSsssSsssS."

"What?"

Harry answered, "'Oh cold one, let us speak our minds.'"

"That's not what Willow said."

"Yes it is. The incantation is in Parseltongue."

Luna asked, "Oh, so if I hiss that, I can talk to the snakes, too."

"Yes," Willow answered.

"OK, let me hear this again, perhaps slower."

- - -

"Hello, pecan. Did you give Harry his letter?"

"Oh, no! I completely forgot! We've been so busy talking with the snakes and an old turtle that lives in the stream. Harry, you got a letter. Here, open it up!"

"It's an acceptance letter to Hogwarts. And a list of items we'll need."

"You can't be going to Hogwarts! You're too young."

"Oh, Daddy!"

"Congratulations, both of you. You're growing up so fast!"

- - -

"Larry?"

"Yes, Selene."

"Did you teach the children the tickling charm?"

"No."

"They were casting Rictusempra on each other while they were playing with their wands. How did they know that spell?"

"Well, I did cast it on Luna when we were joking around the other day. But only once."

"Was Harry there?"

"Yes, he was."

"You know he picks spells up really fast. Be careful what you show them."

"Yes, dear."

- - -

The last Wednesday before the school year started, the Lovegoods went to Diagon Alley to get their materials. The first stop was Gringotts Bank. After Selene handed over her key, they were asked to follow a goblin to Hornswaggle's office. There he informed them that Harry's parents had left him funds to pay for his school supplies. He supplied them with a replacement key ("The original is in the Headmaster's keeping. We've changed the locks, so while he has never tried to enter the vault, should he change his mind, he won't be able to.")

The kids enjoyed the cart ride to the Lovegood's vault, and then to the Potter's vault. There was a lot more money in Harry's vault, but they just took what they thought they'd need for his books and clothes. Luna was sad that they didn't see any dragons, but their driver told her that she was correct -- there were working dragons in the caves.

- - -

"Harry, we get our Hogwarts books and things this Friday!"

"Sorry, Ron. We won't be going with you. Aunt Selene and Uncle Larry took Friday and Monday off. We're just going to enjoy our last few days together. We already have our stuff. Oh, and we got an owl."

"Really? What kind?"

"A snowy owl. She's white and beautiful. Luna wanted a raven, but the man at the store said they weren't as good with mail, so her parents got us an owl to share."

"Nice. We'll just have to use the school owls."

"What are you complaining about? What would you need an owl for? You only answered two of our letters all last year."

"Well, it would just be neat to have one."

"Maybe. But you can clean out her cage any time."

"I'll pass."

"Have fun at Diagon Alley!"

- - -

"Harry! You'll never guess what happened. We saw Lockhart in the bookstore, and my father and Malfoy's father got into a fight!"

"Oh, that's awful. Is your father alright?"

"He's fine. I just wish that they would just lock him up. He used to be a follower of You-Know-Who."

"Lockhart was a follower of You-Know-Who?"

"No, Malfoy's dad."

"What was Lockhart like?"

"Pompous."

"That's the impression I got from the book of his I read. I couldn't believe we have to buy all of his books. We decided to just get one set and share."

"That's not the worst of it. He was telling the reporters that he's going to be a teacher at Hogwarts this year."

"Well, I hope we learn something from him."

"I wonder who he's replacing? Hey, there's something different about you."

"I got a haircut."

"Yeah, like you needed it! You keep your hair so short. . . . But that's not it."

"He got new glasses, Ron! Maybe you need some."

"Well, excuse me, Ginny! Can't they fix your eyes at St. Mungos?"

"Aunt Selene checked into it a few years ago. It's dangerous to do that while I'm still growing. I may end up with worse eyesight. They'll probably be able to do something for me in a few years."

"I think they look very nice, Harry."

"Thank you, Ginny."

- - -

Selene stood up from the fireplace, and called to the rest of the family, "Larry! Kids! I have to go over to the Croakers'. Rosamond is ill, and Algie has to go out. I'll be back late."

Luna looked up from the book she was reading and asked, "Can I go too? I like Mrs. Croaker."

"Very well, Luna. You two stay out of trouble!"

"Yes, dear."

"We will, Aunt Selene."

Larry looked at Harry, as the two women of the house floo-ed away.
"Well, Harry, want to practice some flying?"

- - -

Later that night, Selene floo-ed home. "Larry! Hi. Algie just floo-ed. The emergency is going to take longer than they expected. We'll just be spending the night and see you in the morning. Tell Harry I love him. Good night."

- - -

Luna got a drink of water and stopped in the bedroom with Rosamond Croaker.

"Hello," she said, finding the older woman awake.

"Oh, hello, dear. What time is it?"

"Getting close to two."

"You should be asleep."

"So should you."

"I don't think so. I think I'm done sleeping. Oh! I just wish the pain would go away. Please, may I hold your hand? Thank you, dear."

"It's funny, when you're young you don't know anything about death. You're young and immortal! Then, as you get older, you don't think about it, because it's so very far away. Then there's a time when you know it's coming, and you wish it weren't. It's sometimes called a mid-life crisis. You realize you're going to die, and all those plans you made when you're young just aren't going to happen before you go. Just a word of warning -- men sometimes get crazy when that happens. They do all sorts of foolish things trying to convince

themselves that they're still young, or virile, or that their dreams aren't dead. You just have to be careful with them at that time.

"Later, as you get even older your body stops working so well. I had a great uncle who went blind, and his legs got weak and he couldn't walk very well, and he told me he never got hungry and his food didn't have any taste any more. He lived to a hundred and two. His mind was wonderful, though, but his body was dying around him. He lived as a bachelor until he retired, then married his childhood sweetheart, who was a widow. They celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary before she died. He lived another decade or more. But when he died, it was peaceful. I think he had been ready for several years before it happened.

"I thought I was ready. But now I'm afraid. I was in Gryffindor, you know. I always thought I could face anything. But I'm afraid now.

"He,he, not so afraid as to cast the spell to become a ghost. But still, I don't want to go. Will you stay with me? Thank you, dear."

- - -

"Luna? Luna? Oh, there you are. How's Rosamond?"

"She went away. She was there, then all the magic faded, and she went away. She stopped wheezing, but she went away. Her hand cooled off too. But she went away."

"Oh, Luna. I'm so sorry. I assure you, we didn't want you to be the one with her. . . ."

"She went away. She went away."

"Yes, Luna. Let's go. Come on."

"She went away. She went away."

"Please, Luna, let go. There's nothing more we can do. Come on, dear, let go."

- - -

Harry went into Luna's room, and spoke with Selene.

"Will she be alright?"

"The healers think she's in shock, but she should get better soon."

"She didn't seem to know me."

"No, the healers think that she's sort of hiding from the world in her own mind. You just have to give her time. Do you want to sit with her. It might be a good idea to have someone with her when she wakes up."

"I suppose. I'll sit with her."

"Good boy. Harry, this is one of the things that married people do. I don't know if you used it in your vow, but many people promise to love each other in sickness and in health. When your husband or wife is sick and you have to take care of them it can be a very difficult time. Patience is very important when working with sick people." Harry nodded, and went into Luna's room.

- - -

"Harry?"

"Luna! You're awake! How do you feel."

"I'm fine, Harry. Why are you sleeping in that chair?"

"You weren't very fine when you came back from the Croakers' house. Your mum thought someone should be with you when you woke up."

"Thank you, but it's probably not necessary for you to sleep on that chair. Come sleep with me."

"Alright. Don't steal all the blankets."

"I'll try not to.

"Harry?

"Yes, Luna?"

"Another one has moved."

"What?"

"Another dark object attached to your scar has moved. The one from Swindon is south of us, now."

"How do you know? We haven't even gotten the map out yet."

"I just know. The one from Draco's house has moved."

"It was at Draco's house? I didn't even know he lived in Swindon. How did you know that?"

"I just know."

"But what's south? We're only forty kilometers from the Channel, and across that is France, and farther south is Spain, and Africa. If it's down there, it may be years before we can get it."

"Then it will be years. But I don't think so. It will be days, when we're at Hogwarts together. It will be nice being there with you."

"It's going to be an adventure. I'm glad we're going together."

"Me, too. Good night, Harry. I love you."

"Good night, Luna. I love you, too."

- - -

"Dear Diary. . . ."

- - -

"Aunt Selene?"

"Yes, Harry," she answered, as they were making breakfast.

"You and Uncle Larry are married, and there's only one bed in your room. . . ."

Selene thought, 'Uh, oh. I think he wants a refresher on The Talk.'

Harry continued, "and last night Luna and I slept together. . . ."

Selene sighed.

"but it's so uncomfortable! How can you sleep together every night?"
Harry finished.

"What do you mean, uncomfortable?"

"She must have kicked me at least three times, and almost pushed me out of the bed, after crowding me to the edge. I can't get mad, because she was sleeping, but how do you stand it every night?"

Selene gave him a smile. "It's something that you have to get used to. But once you do, you don't want to sleep apart. It's very comforting to sleep with your spouse, and you miss it when you're away from each other. Don't worry about it, you won't be allowed to be together all the time until after you leave Hogwarts. Now, why don't you take her breakfast in bed." She handed Harry a tray for Luna and him, as she set one up for Larry and herself.

'Children,' she thought, 'innocent children to whom "sleeping together" means "sleeping." Was I ever that young?' She used the opportunity to give him a refresher on The Talk anyway.

- - -

"I don't like this."

"But she shouldn't miss the sorting. She's up and talking and acting almost normal. She'll be fine."

"I don't know, Larry. She's different. She's always staring now. And she doesn't seem to be as animated as normal."

"She'll be fine in a few days. Harry will take care of her."

"I just feel that something's wrong."

- - -

"Good bye, Luna! I love you. Take care! Write lots of letters."

"Good bye Mum! Good bye Daddy!"

"Good bye Harry. I can't tell you how proud I am of you, and how happy I am that you came to our family." She continued in a whisper, "Take care of Luna. She doesn't seem to have completely recovered. I love you!"

"I love you too, Aunt Selene. And I can never thank you enough for rescuing me from that place."

- - -

"That barrier was weird. Kind of scary, too."

"It wasn't scary, Harry."

"Well, not all of us can see magic. What did you see?"

"Muggle repellent, of course. Notice-me-not, restricted to Muggles. A sidehill winder as we came through. And a dimensional shift. That looked weird. It may have said platform nine and three quarters, but it's a magically created place."

"Like our trunks being bigger on the inside than the outside?"

"Yes. Strange about the winder, though. They're native to the New World, and there are no hills in the train station."

Harry looked at her, worried. Several times since she returned from the Croakers' she had seen animals that he hadn't, that weren't even native to the area. He would just have to keep taking care of her.

"Er, right. Are you sure it was a sidehill winder? I didn't see it. Shall we wander around the train, and meet people?"

"We can if you want."

- - -

"Lovegood, Harry."

"Hmmm. You weren't always named Lovegood. But no matter. Good mind. Loyal to your family. Not surprising, considering what your old family was like. And you're married. You realize that there are no provisions for married students here?"

"That's alright. As long as we're in the same house."

"No guarantees. But I like your theory about Muggle-raised. That shows real intelligence. Therefore RAVENCLAW!"

- - -

"Lovegood, Luna."

"I just sorted your husband."

"Yes. Now put me in the same house, please."

"Not until I say so. You're pretty sneaky. . . ."

"Thank you."

"And brave. Some of the things you've done; and talked him into doing. . . ."

"He's brave, because he does what he has to do despite being afraid.
I'm just not afraid."

"Smart, too. That's good enough for me. RAVENCLAW!"

- - -

"Weasley, Ginevra."

"GRYFFINDOR!"

- - -

"Luna?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"If you wait here, I'll go get the brush and do your hair."

"Thank you Harry."

"You're Luna, right?"

"Yes."

"I'm"

"Penelope Clearwater. Yes, you told us in the Great Hall."

"Uh, yes. First years should go right to bed."

"I have to wait for Harry."

"He's a first year, too. He should go to bed."

"Not yet. We're not ready yet."

"Luna, I'm a prefect. . . ."

"Hello. Got it, Luna."

"You're Harry, right?"

"That's right."

"Why are you brushing her hair?"

"Somebody's got to do it. . . ."

"And I never liked doing it until Harry started doing it for me."

"How long have you been brushing Luna's hair?"

"I don't know. Years, Luna?"

"Years. Every night."

"Wow. I wish I had a brother who would do that for me."

"He's not my brother."

"No, we're just related."

"I, uh, see. Well, finish up, and get to bed. Classes start early tomorrow."

- - -

"Uh, Luna? Did you just kiss Harry?"

"Yes. We've been doing that for years before we go to bed, too."

"You must come from a very loving family."

"Yes."

- - -

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts. Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned.

"It will be quite a while before you will be turning furniture into pigs. We shall start with transfiguring these matches into needles. This can take some students weeks to master, so pay attention, and take good notes."

- - -

". . . .Bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death. If you aren't as big a group of dunderheads as I usually have to teach.

"Miss Lovegood!"

"Hullo."

"Pay attention! If I told you to find me a bezoar where would you look?"

"On the third shelf of that cabinet over there."

"Huh? There's no bezoar here!"

"It's behind the blue bottle."

"How did you know it was there?"

"I saw it on the way in."

"A point from Ravenclaw for your cheek!"

- - -

As Harry, Luna, and the rest of the first year Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students came up the stairs from the dungeons, they heard some screams. Harry rushed to the top of the stairs. Something small and blue was dive-bombing the students in the Entrance Hall. Harry whipped out his wand and yelled "Aquamenti!" A

jet of water erupted from his wand and struck the blue creature, knocking it out of the air. Students gathered around to look at it, until Filch appeared and shooed them away. Harry and Luna went into the Great Hall for lunch, meeting Draco inside.

"Hi, Harry. How are classes going?"

"Not too bad, Draco. Yours going OK?"

"Yes. They get harder second year. Well, some of them. You know what Lockhart did? Let a bunch of Cornish Pixies loose in the class, then ran away."

"Oh, is that what it was? One of them was attacking students in the Entrance Hall. Oh, by the way, do you know if any of the Slytherin first years are Muggle-raised?"

"One. Why? He's getting a bunch of grief from his house mates. I suggested he change houses, but he's stubborn."

"I'm going to have an informal meeting with the Muggle-raised tonight after dinner, and was hoping you could ask him to come."

"I'll ask him. What are you meeting for?"

"Teaching them things the wizard-raised already know."

- - -

"What's this all about, Lovegood?" John Tunny, Hufflepuff, asked.

"Yeah, why'd you want to get all of us together? It's not like we don't have enough problems already," Colin Cleevey added.

"That's why I asked you to come. My friend Hermione is a Muggle-born, and was telling me about her problems last year. She said that she had trouble at first getting the magic working and after talking a little, I had an idea why she was having trouble. I'd like to test it out with you."

"Typical Ravenclaw," said Mike Daly, the only Slytherin there.

"What's your idea?" asked Liz Ericson, another Ravenclaw.

Harry answered, "I've been doing household magic for several years, and I bet lots of the rest of the first years who were raised in wizarding households either have been doing it or have watched and played at it for years. So I thought you might want to learn at least some of the basic wand motions for spells. I suppose I could teach you how to use magic to do the dishes, but there's no dirty dishes to practice it on, and it's illegal for students to do magic at home."

"If it's illegal, why did you do it?" asked Tunny.

"As my aunt explained, I wasn't a student, so it was like a . . . loop hole, she said."

"Why?" asked Mike.

"Why, what?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I was raised by Muggles for years, and if things hadn't changed I'd be in your shoes, and I hope someone would help me."

"'Do unto others', huh?"

"What?"

"Don't you know that saying? It's from the Bible, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?'" Mike asked.

"Uh, no. Haven't read the Bible, but I think I probably should."

"I'll tell you the parts to skip. Some of it is as boring as Binns."

"Thanks, Mike." The two boys smiled at each other.

"OK, there's a few main wand movements, and some variations. There's the flick, the swish, the wave, the point or jab, the rotate, and the circle."

"That's a lot."

"It sounds like a lot, but individually they're not that hard. This is the flick."

- - -

"Very good, Mr. Tunny. That is an excellent needle. I can tell that you have been practicing. You too, Miss Shrake. You are an exceptional group of first years; you all seem to be picking this up very quickly."

- - -

"Bugger! Another dead end."

"We'll find it, Harry. It's not on this floor, anyway. I just thought we could find a stairway to it, since the most obvious way is blocked on the next level."

"But I'm sure that I was through here the other day. I don't think it ended in a brick wall then."

"The walls change. The stairs change. Doors change -- sometimes they're only there certain day's of the week. We should go back, it's almost curfew. We'll try again tomorrow."

"Too bad you didn't see it by accident like you did with the beehive in Snape's class."

"Bezoar. And these black lines are very hard to see. Once they are a few feet away from you, they virtually disappear."

"OK. Let's get back to the tower. Maybe we should go after the other one?"

"It keeps moving. I think someone's carrying it. I thought we'd try this one first."

"OK, this one, then the moving one. We'll try again tomorrow. Third time's the charm."

- - -

"So what now, Harry?"

It was another meeting of the Muggle-Raised, as they called themselves.

"As I see it, we can do one of three things. I can teach you the household charms I know, we can study together, or we can stop having these meetings."

"We could join one of the study groups in our common room," Liz said.

"I can't," Mike Daly grumbled. "Half the other Slytherin's don't think I belong in the house, in the school, or among the living."

John said, "Hey, I'm Hufflepuff. There's probably a magic rule that says I can't say anything bad about my house mates, but there is some of that even in my house. So, if it's all the same to you, I'd like to keep this going. I like you guys. Most days." The smile he had removed all insult from the last sentence.

"But it doesn't have to be either/or. We can study, and we can learn the charms you know," Liz added.

"OK, I'm easy. Next question, I'd like to open the group up to any other first year that wants to join us. I know Luna would want to study with us."

"She's your cousin?"

"Relative, yeah. And anyone else, as long as they behave and work." Nobody had any objection to that, so they called it a night.

- - -

"Through that wall."

"Alright, let's try this way, maybe we can find the room."

The two Lovegoods wandered down several more corridors before they found it.

"There, in the cabinet."

Harry and Luna had found the Trophy Room. Luna led Harry to one of the glass covered cases. She pointed at a plaque.

"That's it."

"For special services to the school, awarded to T. M. Riddle, March 18, 1945. Who's T. M. Riddle?"

"I don't know. The real question is what are all these objects? I still haven't found anything about dark magical connections."

"We might have to ask someone. But I don't want to. I don't want it known that I'm dark."

"You're not dark, Harry. It's just something left over. These objects are dark. And this whole case, this whole room is warded. Someone or something will know if we try to open this."

"Something?"

"It could be connected to a bell or siren, or something."

"Oh, for a moment there I thought you were talking about a guardian creature."

"If it alerted Snape, you could say it was guarded by a giant bat."

They both laughed at that.

"But it's not going anywhere, so we'll have to learn how to get past these wards."

"That should be a whole lot easier, Harry, with the Hogwarts library at our disposal."

"True. Let's go see what it has on wards?" He gallantly offered her his arm, and they headed to the Library.

- - -

'It sounded interesting,' Harry thought to himself. 'Defense against the Dark Arts. Learn to protect yourself against evil wizards, witches, curses, objects, and creatures. This should be one of the more exciting classes. But I'm not sure if this or Binn's is more boring.'

"And I wore my lime green robes with the orange frill. My hair was perfect, and I was set to fight the zombies. They came at me, roaring, dropping bits of decayed flesh. I knew I had to do something quick, and pretty devastating, or they would overwhelm me with sheer numbers!"

"Nothing came to mind," Harry mumbled.

"Nothing came to mind. So I cast a spider legs charm, and ran up the cliff face. I perched myself on a ledge a good three meters above the filthy fiends, and considered my options. But while I was thinking, they were still coming. They were finding hand holds and foot holds, climbing on each other!"

"I was in a world of trouble," Harry mumbled. Luna elbowed him with a smile. She had read the book too.

"I was in a world of trouble. Zombies can't be affected by any of the standard spells you would use against a living opponent. Stunners, sleep, daze, confusion -- none of them work. Body damaging spells, like bone-breaking spells, blindness, laming spells -- they might take out a limb, but the zombies would still come at you. It was then, with the zombies almost to my ledge, that I remembered their weakness!"

"Salt," Harry and Luna muttered together, trying hard to hold their laughter.

"Salt! There was plenty of sand amidst the cracks of the cliff, so I started transfiguring it into salt. As quick as I could transfigure some, I would brush it off the cliff. Where it hit the zombies, they started screaming as in pain, as if a dead thing can feel pain! They fell to the ground and twitched, and never moved again. But there were more zombies than the sand I had available! So I conjured a whirlwind, which swept across the beach picking up sand, and while concentrating to control the dust devil, I transfigured the sand it carried to salt. Sending the mini-tornado across the zombies repeatedly, I finally destroyed them all!" He finished with a bow. About half the class looked at Don Bixler, one of Harry's dorm-mates. It was his turn today. He raised his hand, in a bored way.

"Yes, you have a question?"

"Yes, sir. Can you teach us the spider legs charm?"

"Sorry. I don't think they teach that until sixth year charms. I wouldn't want to get in trouble unleashing a class of first year students all over the walls! Considering the way Mr. Filch goes on about dirt on the floors, he'd have my hide if I let a class walk over the walls! I doubt even my prestigious skill in defense would protect me from our caretaker in that situation." He laughed at his own joke. He was the only one laughing.

"Then can you teach us the sand to salt transformation?"

And so it went. The designated questioner would ask about every spell mentioned by Lockhart and he would give an excuse for not showing or teaching it. The first class it had been several people -- mostly Ravenclaws. Lockhart had actually tried a few spells the first day, which hadn't worked. After that he always had an excuse. The class quickly decided to have a designated questioner for each class.

After not showing them any of the curses he said wouldn't work against zombies, Don ran out of questions. Harry raised his hand, causing some of the other students to wonder what was going on.

"Yes, Mr. Lovegood?" Lockhart sounded relieved that someone else was asking questions. Even he was beginning to realize that he wasn't satisfying the class. He couldn't understand why. When he went on the lecture circuits he was always a big hit with his stories. These children had him exclusively for a whole school year. Didn't they realize how much they would have to pay if he were doing this out of the school setting?

"Is there some other type of zombie? Or something like a zombie that doesn't make any noises, isn't decayed, but is dead, and moves? It's, uh, supposedly very pale, and in the story I heard they were underwater until a traveler accidentally broke a ward that released them to attack him. I thought they were zombies, but they don't sound like what you encountered."

"That sounds like the Inferi. A horrible dark creature, I think there were some used during the war by You-Know-Who. Very dark, and powerful -- which may be why they don't decay. Where did you hear about it?"

"Oh, around a campfire several years ago in the New World."

"Ah, campfire stories! I've heard my share, but they don't hold any interest for me anymore; not with all the real adventures I've had. Oh, there's the bell!"

- - -

Every time Harry brought up the subject of looking for the other linked object, Luna would tell him to have patience. It was moving all over the castle, and she wasn't going to bother anyone until she was absolutely sure they could get it. Harry gave up asking after getting the same answer three times.

- - -

"Your papers were for the most part very good. What I've come to expect from Ravenclaws. Before we move on are there any questions? Yes, Miss Lovegood?"

"Professor Lockhart was just telling us about his defeat of some zombies," Luna began. McGonagall got a very strange look on her face, as if she just stepped in something unpleasant. "He said that he used a sand to salt transfiguration and it would be too difficult for us to learn. Is that a difficult transformation?"

"What do you think, class? Sand to salt? Miss Esberg?"

"They're similar size and shape, and sometimes even similar color."

"Very good, anything else? Mr. Bixler?"

"Similar sounding words."

"Exactly. Anyone else? Mr. Towey?"

"Both minerals?"

"Yes. So, what would you expect? Easy or hard transfiguration, Miss Lovegood?"

"I would think easy, for a single grain of sand. What about a pile of sand?"

"More difficult, but not exceptionally. A little practice and it shouldn't tax even a first year. However, I would suggest you look up exactly how much salt it takes to destroy a zombie, and the proper method of doing so."

"Is that an assignment?"

"Indeed it is. I want six inches on it by our next class."

- - -

The Muggle-Raised had become the Inter-House Study Group. It usually included half to two thirds of the whole first year class. A few Slytherins never attended, as if to counter them almost all the Hufflepuffs showed up. Some of the Ravenclaws also didn't show up,

preferring their own company. It met most nights shortly after dinner was cleaned up, and, without any organization, someone almost always brought some library books relevant to the assignments. A few times they had to dispatch people to the Library if the necessary books were in use, and only once did they find they were unable to get an assignment done. However, since it wasn't due the very next day, the group was still able to complete it on time.

Another group also used the Great Hall for studying. Hermione, Draco, Pansy Parkinson(who seemed to have a crush on the blond Slytherin), Neville, Susan Bones, and Hannah Abbot met several times a week at the Hufflepuff table. They were frequently joined by the second year Gryffindor boys and girls, and others from the various houses. Even Theodore Nott showed up a few times when they had a particularly difficult assignment.

As it was now after dinner the first years were gathering.

"Hi, everybody!"

"Thanks a lot, Lovegood!"

"Hey, give her a break! Who knew just asking a question would get us more work?"

Colin asked, "What work?"

"I asked about transfiguring sand to salt to get rid of zombies, and Professor McGonagall assigned us a small essay on how to use salt to kill zombies. But since I got us the work, I brought the reference materials. Dark Creatures, Volume Z and Dangers of the Carribean. Oh, and Harry, here's Volume I for looking up Inperi."

Mike Daly took over, as he usually did.

"OK, the Ravenclaws have the extra assignment, but the rest of us still have the potions essay and need to practice the Placement Charm. What reference materials do we have for the potion assignment?"

And so it went. They passed the reference materials around; people felt free to ask questions, and while they didn't actually copy from each other, you would have to say it was a collaborative effort. After they practiced the Placement Charm many of the other students left. Mike stayed around, reading about Dark Creatures. As the Ravenclaws finished up their assignment, he looked up and said, "You know what this means, don't you?"

"What?" asked Liz, one of Luna's dorm mates.

"We just found that to kill a zombie with salt you have to completely cover it, and keep it that way for several days. Much easier to just destroy its head. But what this really means is we have proof that Lockhart is full of it."

"We sort of came to that conclusion a while ago."

"Yes, but this is proof. According to these references, what he said couldn't have happened. Is anyone else bothered that we haven't learned thing one about defending ourselves?"

Harry nodded. "I thought D.A.D.A. would be our most exciting class. But you're right. We're not learning anything from it, and it does bother me."

Mike smiled, "I have an idea."

- - -

Dear Aunt Selene and Uncle Larry

IWe are doing well. I think Luna has completely recovered from the shock of Mrs. Croaker. Unfortunately, it took her several days to get over it, and she got a bit of a reputation for being strange. It doesn't seem to bother her, so we ignore the names she's sometimes called.

We have a problem, though. The Defense against the Dark Arts teacher isn't teaching us. You remember how we had to buy a complete set of Lockhart's books? That's because Lockhart is the teacher, not that he actually teaches us anything. He quotes stories

out of his own books almost word for word, and hasn't taught us a single spell.

A group of first years, including Luna and me, are going to teach ourselves as much defense as possible. We did some research, and hope you can send us two copies of last year's defense book, *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection* by Quentin Trimble. There is a copy in the library, but there are about twenty of us who want to do this.

Thanks, and have a happy Halloween

Love

Harry

- - -

The Halloween feast had been fun. A lot of food, Hagrid's giant pumpkins floating overhead, the Weasley Twins had learned some self transfiguration spell and one had donkey ears and the other had cat ears. The feast went late, and first years' study group didn't meet. Harry and Luna headed up to the Ravenclaw tower with the rest of their house. Luna settled in a chair away from the fireplace (since that was "reserved" by a group of seven years) while Harry went up to his room to get the brush. Some second year girls came over to Luna while she waited.

"It's so sad that you can't brush your own hair," Marietta Edgecombe said.

"Maybe someday you'll learn," Cho Chang added.

"I don't know, it may be beyond her capability. She's obviously not Ravenclaw material; the hat probably put her here so that her cousin could take care of her. Sad, really," Sue Baker, a second year, added.

Luna sat without reacting to them.

"What's the matter? Too dumb to know you've been insulted?" asked Marietta.

She looked at them with wide unblinking eyes.

"Oh, Hullo. You know, there's very little I like better than witty repartee. If you hear of any around here, let me know please?"

They stared at her for a moment, then were interrupted by Harry's angry voice, "What's going on here?"

"Hullo, Harry. These girls came to say something, but it wasn't intelligent."

"Keep better track of your girlfriend, Lovegood. We don't like smart asses here."

Harry rejoined, "Then why do you hang out together?"

At that point the picture covering the entrance to the Ravenclaw tower swung open. Penelope Clearwater, the sixth year prefect ran in quickly.

"Filch's cat's been killed! Someone killed it and hung it up. There was a note written in blood on the wall that said 'The Chamber of Secrets has been opened! Enemies of the heir beware!'"

- - -

The school was abuzz with rumors. Everyone knew something, but nobody could agree with each other. The second year and the first year groups got together a few days later and compared notes. Hermione had asked Binns and recounted the legend of Slytherin's Chamber. Draco said that the word in the Slytherin common room was that Muggle-born and half-blood wizards were going to be attacked. Someone had heard that there was some sort of attack about fifty years ago. Beyond that the stories got wilder and wilder -- vampires, hags, Nundus. Nothing helpful. Several people had received their copies of the previous year's D.A.D.A. textbook, but most hadn't, so they decided to hold off on that. When Hermione

heard what the first years were going to teach themselves defense, she quickly talked the second years into doing something similar. They did a little homework that night and broke up early.

As they were leaving, Harry noticed Ginny seemed upset. He asked her what the problem was.

"I can't help thinking that if Harry Potter were here that he'd solve the problem."

"I think you're putting your trust in someone who doesn't exist. . . ."

"Harry Potter does too exist!"

"You misunderstand me. I'm not saying he doesn't exist, but maybe he grew up in such a way that he wouldn't solve the problem? I think we have to work on our own problems and solutions. We can help each other, but to depend on someone we've never met and don't really know isn't very useful."

"I suppose. That poor cat."

"I'm sure one of the teachers will find a way to cure it. Good night, Ginny."

Harry and Luna headed out of the Great Hall. They made their way to the hall where the attack took place.

"Harry, the words are warded."

"How?"

"Looks like against water, Scourgify, a few other spells. Designed not to go away, I guess."

"Shall we head to the Library and see if we can find a way to get past the wards?"

"We have to eventually, so we might as well now."

They met Hermione in the Library. Or rather she met them, surrounded by a group of large volumes.

"What are you studying?"

"Wards," Harry answered.

"That's NEWT level magic. Are you sure you want to be playing with it?"

"Yes," Luna answered, turning a page.

"Why?"

Harry answered, "We figure that the magical criminal profession is wide open, and this knowledge will help us become successful burglars."

Hermione looked aghast.

"Actually, we were just curious because we noticed that writing on the wall was warded against being washed off. We thought we'd take the opportunity to learn how to counter it," Luna explained, turning another page.

"You don't think the teachers know that?"

"Uh, I suppose so," Harry stammered.

Luna still didn't look up from her book as she answered, "Doesn't matter. We still want to know how to counter it. What's the best book on wards and breaking them have you read?"

"The Vern book on the bottom of the pile is pretty good. Wait a minute! I wasn't trying to do anything wrong when I was researching them!"

Harry and Luna looked at each other, and started to laugh.

"Did it ever occur to you that other people might want to research them just like you?" Harry asked, quieting his laughter before Madam Pince kicked them out of the library. Luna was already picking up the book.

"Thank you, Hermione," she said, starting to read.

- - -

A week passed, and the rumors started to subside. Harry and Luna spent more time studying wards in the library after the study group sessions. After several days of research, Luna showed Harry something from the Vern book.

After reading it, he said, "That's nice, but if you don't know what the ward is warding against, it doesn't do much good."

"But we know at least one thing the ward on the sign is stopping: water. Come on."

They moved through the castle to the third floor corridor where the attack had occurred. On the wall, in foot-high red letters, it said:

The Chamber of Secrets has been opened.

Enemies of the heir, beware.

"Ok, let's try to remove the water ward." Luna pointed her wand at the word "The" and concentrated. She mumbled the incantation to herself, and smiled. She then said, "Aquamenti" and sprayed the word with water. It washed off the wall.

"Well, that worked. Good job, Luna. Let's go."

"Not yet, Harry. You try. Make the word "beware" go away. But only that one"

"Ok," he said, as he tried the process himself. Meanwhile, Luna was working on the rest of the message. She looked at his work, and said, "Harry, you unwarded "heir" and "been", too. Good thing I didn't need them."

"What do you mean, need them?"

"Hang on, almost done. Yes, that looks good. Can you wash the wall, please?"

He sprayed the wall with water, and most of the letters disappeared. What was left read:

C a t s

n i c e

"Cats nice?" Harry asked, incredulously.

"It was the only thing I could get it to spell, and even then I had to convert an "o" into a "c" to make it work."

"So, we've spent days in the library just so you can praise cats?"

"Not exclusively for that, no. But mostly, yeah."

"Alright, let's get out of here before someone catches us and accuses us of petrifying Filch's cat for a prank."

- - -

"But Albus, what does it mean?" the deputy Headmistress asked, looking at the wall.

"I think it means someone isn't panicking. And knows quite a bit about wards."

"So, you don't think the person who did this opened the Chamber?"

"People. I'm pretty sure I detect two magical signatures here. And neither of them set up the wards that protected the words. As a matter of fact, most of the wards are still there. No, someone out there is either very brave, or very foolish." He thought to himself, 'Two signatures. I wonder if they had red hair.'

- - -

Harry and Luna were relaxing with a good portion of the Ravenclaw house a few days later after watching the horrible defeat of the Gryffindor Quidditch team at the hands of itself. Technically, they lost to the Slytherins, but anyone objective (which would be most of the school except Gryffindor and Slytherin, and maybe even some of them) would have to say that, except for the Seeker, the Gryffindor team played better than the Slytherins. They didn't get more points, because their Seeker kept getting in the way of his own Chasers. They were better organized, when the Seeker wasn't distracting his teammates with his insults, harangues, and basic playing instructions. The keeper and captain might have been more effective if he hadn't had to pay so much attention trying to get the seeker to leave the rest of the team alone. Harry would be very surprised if McLaggen was still on the team after today.

He noticed Luna looking at him. She was smiling. This wasn't a "I'm happy" smile. It was an "I've got a plan" smile. It was a "You're going to be busy doing something you don't want to" smile. It was trouble.

"What?" Harry asked, hoping to get this over with as soon as possible.

Her smile changed a little to an "I'm happy" smile, and Harry figured it was because she knew that he knew that she was up to something.

"Well?"

"I was just thinking. . . ."

"And?"

"I think we should stop researching wards so much. . . ."

"And with all this extra time, we will, what?"

"Spend some time improving you."

"What?"

"Well," she said, lowering her voice, "we know that you're probably an animagus. I was thinking we could start doing some research into turning you into an animal."

"That sounds like it might be fun."

"But first we're going to get another partner."

"We are?"

"Yes. Come on."

Luna led him across the common room to a table where a number of students of different years were quietly working on writing.

"Liz, can we talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Luna. Harry. Sure, I guess, but this is a quiet table." Some of the other students were giving them the evil eye.

"Take your stuff, we'll find an empty classroom."

A few minutes later the three first years were sitting in an unused classroom.

"What's this about?" Liz asked. She seemed nervous. Harry shrugged and looked at Luna.

"It's about a trade." She rummaged through her bag for a moment, and brought out a box. "I've seen you writing in a diary, and I've seen the words disappear." Liz' eyes grew wide, and she clutched her bag to her chest.

"What you don't know about the diary -- or maybe you do -- is that it is intelligent, and it is evil."

"How do you know?"

Luna went on to explain about her mage sight. She gave an abbreviated description of the discovery of the Greek temple, complete with her scrapbook entries that included an article from an English newspaper out of Constantinople about the find and the discoverers.

"You mentioned a trade?"

"Yes, we'll trade you a new diary with a magic lock that will only open to you for the one you have, and we'll give you an opportunity to study animagus transformation with Harry."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I can see that you're probably an animagus. You can learn to change into an animal."

"Alright. But I have to warn you, that book can be pretty scary. There were a few times I found myself somewhere without knowing how I got there, or what I had just done."

"I think the book was possessing you. If you want to know about evil books, talk to Ginny Weasley. Her father's job is to recover things like this, and she's told some pretty horrific tales about hexed books." Luna handed over the box. Liz opened it and took out a brand new diary. When she handed over the old diary Harry thought she was both relieved and reluctant to do it.

"Where did you get that book?" Harry asked.

"I found it with my school books after we picked up our school supplies in Diagon Alley. I figured it was either accidentally added, or it was hidden in one of the other books I bought."

"Or it was placed there on purpose," Harry added.

"What do you mean?"

"If the book caused you to forget or not know what you did, then ask yourself if there have been any strange occurrences in the castle this year?"

"The Chamber of Secrets?" Liz said, hesitantly.

Harry nodded. "Whoever gave you that was hoping that Slytherin's monster would hurt people."

"How can you be sure that it won't take over you?"

"Simple," said Luna, "we won't look at it, write in it, or even open it."

"We won't?"

"Dark, and intelligent, remember. We're only first years, you know."

"Oh, right."

Liz said, "It does have a name in it." Harry looked at her quizzically. "The first page has a name."

Harry carefully opened it and read the name out loud, "T. M. Riddle." He looked at Luna, and she nodded a little.

"Well, close it, Harry, and we'll put it away, and see if my mum can do something about it."

"Your mum?"

"She works for the Ministry of Magic. Sometimes they have to destroy dark objects."

"Oh."

Luna smiled at the other girl, "Thank you, Liz. I think once we get this out of the school over the holiday, that there will be no more strange occurrences."

"I hope not."

- - -

Most of the rest of the study group received their books over the week. They began at the beginning, and started putting in some time at each of their study sessions. Looking ahead, they saw that they would need a room to practice some of the spells that the book described. Some members of each of the houses volunteered to talk to their respective heads to find a place to practice.

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of one of the most prestigious magical schools in the world drank a headache potion, and put down another letter from an angry parent. How could this have happened? Yes, there was a curse on the D.A.D.A. Teaching job. He'd been finding new instructors year after year. Now, even people outside the school were noticing it. Lockhart had been the only person to answer his call for a professor, and he hadn't even asked the man. His reputation was impeccable. The school had been flooded with congratulatory letters when the man had announced his professorship at the bookstore shortly before the term started.

Now he picked up one of the calmer ones.

Dear Headmaster

I am very disappointed to hear that my children's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is incapable of teaching. It is now November and they have not learned a single spell from him. I shudder to think what the results of the OWLs and NEWTs will be this year.

I have sent my children copies of last years' D.A.D.A. text book. They have organized a self study group. I hope that you will at least lend all the help you can to that group.

Very disappointedly yours

Selene Lovegood

At least she kept a civil tongue.

There was a knock on the door. It was time for the weekly meeting of the heads of house. At least there didn't seem to be any problem with excessive inter-house rivalry.

"Come in," he called.

The four heads of house came in. They looked concerned.

"Welcome everyone. Has something happened? Minerva? Why don't you start?"

"Albus, I think we have a problem with our Defense teacher."

Dumbledore felt his stomach do a flip.

"What has he done?"

"It's not what he has done, it's what he hasn't done. A group of my first years have requested a location to conduct some self study because they aren't being taught any spells."

"The same request has come to me from some of my students," said Professor Flitwick.

"And mine!" Pomona Sprout exclaimed. All eyes turned to the potions master.

"Yes, I was approached, too. I was going to see about giving my students private tutoring."

McGonagall turned back to the Headmaster, and said, "I checked with students in the other grades, too. He is not teaching defense. As far as I can tell he is teaching Lockhart."

"The man's a fraud. I thought it the first time I laid eyes on him."

"Thank you, Severus. It does seem obvious now. What do we do about it? You each have full schedules. I can take the class for a little while, but not full time."

"Is there any possible instructor that you could get at such short notice?" Pomona asked.

"I don't know. I've asked just about everyone. But I'll keep trying. For now, Minerva, can you set up a room for the first years? Set up a schedule for the various houses to have equal access. Perhaps meet with the leaders as a group. Be prepared to do the same for the other years."

"Don't tell Lockhart. I'll talk to him, but if we don't see any improvement then I will let him go at the Christmas break."

"Is there anything else? Very well. Regular meeting next week. And my door is always open. Thank you for coming."

- - -

Professor McGonagall answered the door to her office. "Mr. Lovegood. Mr. Daly. What can I do for you?"

"We were told that you were providing a room for our independent Defense study," Mike said.

"Yes, I am. But I'm a little disappointed that all four of you didn't show up. Couldn't you cooperate even that much?"

"All four of us?" asked Harry, with a confused look on his face.

"The leaders of study groups from each house."

Mike and Harry exchanged a look, and smiled. Mike explained, "There isn't anyone else. We're sort of the the unofficial leaders of the first year study group."

"What about Miss Oberuc? She asked me as her head of house to help."

"Terri's just one of the students in the group who happens to be a Gryffindor. We have students in all four houses in the study group. We figured if we asked each of the heads that we'd have a better chance to get help."

"And how did you two become leaders?"

"Harry became a leader when he organized the group."

"And Mike became leader when he started running the meetings."

"And why didn't you just create your own study group in your own houses?"

Harry and Mike looked at each other again. Harry shrugged, "The more the merrier?"

Mike said, "All for one, and one for all?"

"Hey! I read that! That was a good book."

"Long, though."

"Boys! May we get back to the subject at hand? This eliminates the need to worry about schedule conflicts. Let's discuss when you want to use the classroom."

- - -

Harry called, "Colin, Ginny, Bill, Mary! You're the victims. Matt, Sue, Terri, Dan, you're the attackers. Ready! Set! Hello, Headmaster!"

Matt Larkin was a little too ready, and let loose a Jelly Leg curse on the "Hello." Mary Shrake, seeing the Headmaster enter the room, wasn't watching, and fell on the mats that covered the floor. She was quickly given the counter curse, while Matt stammered, "Sorry."

"Good evening, students. I was just wondering what you were studying in this study group."

Everyone seemed to be looking at Harry, so he answered.

"Well, we started with the list of basic hexes given in the textbook. It seems that most people just pick them up from other students. I found that they're all described in 101 Ways to Annoy Your Friends, which I found in the library. Once we all knew them we've been working on the counter-curses. I'd say most people could counter about half the curses at least.

"This," he said, gesturing at the two groups, "is something I was told by an ex-Auror. He said the best counter for a curse is the one you don't have to cast. So we have the attackers here shooting curses at the group down there, and they're practicing dodging. Meanwhile, the attackers get practice aiming and casting, too."

"Very good. And who is this wise ex-Auror?"

"Sirius Black." There was murmuring from some of the children who grew up in wizarding households.

"Sirius Black. Yes, he was studying to be an Auror before his mistaken imprisonment. Yes, now there's an idea. . . ." His voice trailed off as he was thinking. He turned back to the door, saying, "Good job. Carry on!"

Harry watched the Headmaster leave, mumbling, "That was weird."

Luna was somehow right beside him, and said, "You just helped him."

"How did I do that?"

"You reminded him about Sirius. Dumbledore needs him but didn't realize it until you reminded him."

Harry just nodded, then turned back to the group, "OK, let's pick up where we left off. Ready, set, go!"

- - -

"Wow, Luna. This is quite a crowd. Who do you think is going to be running this dueling club?"

"Lockhart."

"How do you know?"

"Look at the stage. Who else would set up spotlights?"

"I think you're right. There he is. Now I know you're right."

They watched as Snape threw Lockhart across the stage with a spell. Harry said to Luna, "We'll have to teach that one to the group. It's basically an overhand jab motion. I wish that wizards would standardize what they called their wand movements."

Lockhart then tried to get the students to pair up and try it. Harry realized right away that there was too little space, and moved away from the center of the Great Hall, holding Luna's hand. They ended up near the stage. Meanwhile, chaos reigned in the main part of the hall. Spells were hitting the wrong people, angry students were fighting with fists, and spell victims were staggering around or lying down if that's how the spell affected them.

Lockhart said to Snape, "This is getting a little out of hand. Perhaps we should get some students on stage to demonstrate how it's done."

"Very well. You, Lovegood! You're in charge of that defense group. Get on stage. And Mr. Nott. Get up there and show everyone what a Slytherin can do."

Harry walked to one end of the stage, while Lockhart went on about dueling etiquette and traditions. Finally, he finished up with, "And now these two will show how a duel goes. Only use the Disarming Spell. Now bow, and begin!"

Both boys brought their wands down, pointing at each other. Harry was also moving to the right, while he said, "Expelliarmus!"

Nott finished his wand movements just a moment later, and said, "Serpensortia!" right before Harry's spell hit him, and his wand went sailing towards the first year. While it tumbled through the air, though, a snake was appearing from the end of Nott's wand. It fell on the floor of the Great Hall just off the end of the stage. Justin Finch-Fletchley yelled in terror as the snake appeared to be preparing to strike at him. Snape tried to move to the edge of the stage but almost tripped over Nott. Lockhart waved his wand and said something, but nothing happened. Luna hissed at the snake and it coiled up her arm.

"I'm taking him back outside where he came from, Harry. I'll see you up in the common room. Let me know what I missed."

As the thin blond wearing a five foot snake walked calmly out off the room, the crowd quietted, everyone giving her a very wide berth. Harry watched for a moment, then went over to Nott. He offered his hand, which Nott took automatically, and Harry helped the older boy up. Handing back his wand, Harry said, "You'll have to teach me that spell some time. It looks pretty neat."

Nott nodded, unable to stop staring at Luna as she left the hall.

He muttered incredulously, "She's the heir?"

- - - - - Many thanks to my Betas Mione Green and Kaetti.

AN: This was a long chapter, and when I finished I felt that I wouldn't write another chapter this long. The length slowed down the update, but I know when I read that I like long chapters, so what're ya gonna do?

Meanwhile, I think the next chapter is mostly written, and is approaching this one in size. I hope to get that done soon, and to my beta's by early next week.

Once that's done, I have to send my hard drive back to the manufacturer -- it's dying. Haven't lost more than a paragraph while working on the next chapter (I keep the master copy on my data crystal -- er, I mean USB thumb drive :-). Hopefully, I'll get my system back quickly.

This chapter would have been up yesterday, except wouldn't read my complete .html file. I converted it to .txt, and read it in that way; still had to go through and reformat a lot by hand.

Thanks for the reviews.

Chapter 9 The Heir of Slytherin

Later in the evening Harry was brushing Luna's hair in the common room. The dueling club fell apart soon after Luna had left. It seemed that Lockhart had lost his audience, and nothing he could yell would bring the focus back on him for any length of time. Harry left, hearing a lot of people whispering, "Loony's the heir of Slytherin!"

"Harry?"

"Yes, Luna?"

"It's snowing outside. Do you think anyone will care if I put the snake in Greenhouse 2?"

"If it stays hidden, it shouldn't matter. I suppose we should tell Professor Sprout, just so she's not surprised by it."

"OK. We'll tell her tomorrow during class."

As they were talking, Harry slowly began to notice that very few other people in the common room were talking, and a lot of them were looking at Harry and Luna, and not in a friendly way. Harry noticed Hermione sitting not too far from them, and got her attention. She came over to them.

"Hermione, do you know why everyone is looking at us?" Harry asked.

"Probably because no one knew Luna was a Parselmouth. And with what was written on the wall when Filch's cat was petrified, some people think that Luna is the heir of Salazar Slytherin. Slytherin was a well-known Parselmouth. It's supposedly hereditary in his family."

Luna looked at Hermione for a moment, seemingly deep in thought.

"No," she finally said. "I'm pretty sure Mum or Daddy never said they were related to Slytherin. Or any of the other founders, either. But I'm not a Parselmouth."

"But everyone heard you! You hissed at the snake and it coiled around your arm." Harry noticed the whole common room seemed to be listening to this conversation.

"It was a spell. I'm not a Parselmouth normally. And now I think the spell has probably worn off, so if you were to bring in a snake now I wouldn't understand it until I cast the spell again. Harry"

Harry interrupted her, "I know it too. We learned it from a Dryad."

"So you could teach this, and anyone would know?"

"Yes," Harry answered, "But we'd need a snake or turtle or something here to know if you got it right."

"Why a turtle?" someone else in the room asked, proving that the conversation was of interest to everyone.

"The spell is like Parseltongue, but it's not exactly the same. It gives you the ability to talk to any reptile. But you don't know if it works unless there's something there you can test it on."

"Will you teach me?" Hermione asked.

"Sure, once we have a snake or something."

A few of the other students had drifted closer. "What was the Dryad like?" one asked. Luna seemed in her element telling the other children about the people they met on some of their trips.

- - -

The next day Hogwarts was snowed in, and the last Herbology class of the year was canceled. The story of the spell seemed to spread as quickly around the school as the story of Luna speaking Parseltongue. Harry and Luna kept repeating the explanation that if you weren't actually talking to a reptile, you spoke English. They related a story of when they tried to use the spell to keep secrets from Luna's parents, but just as you couldn't tell that you weren't speaking English when

you spoke to a snake, you couldn't tell that you weren't speaking Parseltongue when they spoke to each other.

The next day was Saturday, and the Hogwarts express wouldn't take them home until Monday, so the first and second years' study groups met in the Great hall to get their holiday homework done. They took a long break in the afternoon to play in the snow, and a couple of students got detention from Filch for dripping water on the floor. The rest quickly used a drying charm (or learned it right away). Those that didn't have detention met again after supper. As they were breaking up, Harry asked Nott to teach him the Serpensortia spell. He agreed, if Harry would teach him the Parseltongue spell. Harry agreed, but delayed for another time. It had taken Luna more than an hour to get the spell right, and it was too close to curfew.

While Nott and Harry were talking, everyone else had left the Great Hall. They walked out, still talking about the two spells, heading for the Entrance Hall where Nott would take the stairs to the dungeons, and Harry would take the great staircase to the upper levels, to eventually make his way to the Ravenclaw tower. The Entrance Hall was not empty, and as they came to it, they hid out of sight in an alcove.

Dumbledore and Lockhart were near the large, oak front door to the castle. There were several elaborate and expensive looking trunks lying around.

"You can't fire me! I'm an honorary member of the Dark Forces Defense League!"

"I'm an active member, and it wouldn't stop the Board from firing me if I didn't do my job."

"You'll never find anyone with more experience fighting monsters than I have."

"That is neither here nor there, although your qualifications have been questioned. . . ."

"If you are talking about that anonymous letter that was sent to my publishers. . . ."

"It wasn't anonymous, Gilderoy, it was written by a first year who researched some of your statements."

"So I stretched the truth a little! You have to, to sell books."

"We are not selling books, we are teaching children, and you have failed to teach the students how they can protect themselves. I just hope it's not too late for those taking NEWTs and OWLs this year. Now please leave, I believe a carriage is here to take you away."

"You'll regret this Dumbledore! You'll hear from my solicitors!"

"I'm sure I will. Goodnight, Gilderoy."

Lockhart went out the door, his luggage floating after him. Dumbledore shook his head, and walked up the grand staircase.

"Well, that was interesting," Harry remarked.

"About time," Nott added.

"If I don't see you on the train, have a good Christmas, Nott."

"Hey, Lovegood? Why don't the first years hate Slytherins like most of the rest of the school? Why don't you hate Slytherins like most of the rest of the students?"

Harry thought for a second before answering. "I think you have the question backwards. The question is why shouldn't I like Slytherins like any other house? Why do the other students hate Slytherins? I was friends with Draco before he became a Slytherin. He's the same person. I still like him. Mike's a good guy too, even though I didn't get to know him until after he was sorted. I think once you get past the house, and get to know the people you see that the Slytherins are just people, just like anyone else in the other houses."

"So, do you think we should get rid of the houses?"

"Get rid of them? No. They're useful. But I think people let them become too confining. And people buy into ideas that aren't true about them. 'Slytherins are evil.' Well, they aren't. I know for a fact that Draco and Mike are good guys. 'Gryffindors are noble and good.' I know for a fact that one of them was a traitorous murderer in the war against You-Know-Who. So, ignore what people say about the other houses. Get to know them, and let them get to know you, and you might find out that people don't hate Slytherins, but only what they thought Slytherins were like."

Nott went towards the dungeons with a thoughtful look, and Harry hurried up the stairs.

- - -

Sunday was exhausting for Harry and Luna. In the morning Nott taught them the snake spell, and they tried to teach everyone in both years the Parseltongue incantation. Strangely, it was three Muggle-raised who learned it first -- Mike, Tim Vale who was a roommate of Harry's, and a Hufflepuff Mary Shrake. Tim, after speaking with Mike and Mary, thought that it was because all three of them had had musical training before coming to Hogwarts. Tim played the trumpet, Mary played piano, and Mike had voice lessons and sang in a choir. Their ears were probably better tuned to pick up the variations in the hissing.

Five other students were able to cast the spell, but only with Harry or Luna incanting the hiss so they could copy it. Two Gryffindor first years, Jayne Cooper and Brian Poster learned it by heart, though. As they broke for lunch, people were commenting on the irony of the most anti-Slytherin house learning the spell.

After lunch was a humongous snow ball fight. It started with just the first few years, but soon included most of the students. They started out building four snow forts, one per house, and it grew from there. The Hufflepuffs were situated closest to the school, and thus were lacking in snow. They started the escalation by getting older students who could create snow to join the battle, supplying ammunition. The other houses quickly followed suit. When the Weasley twins tried to

melt the Slytherin fort, all three other houses banded together against Gryffindor. After a few hours, the students were ready to go in. Harry and Luna were soon in the middle of a much larger group than they had that morning, and after they went in (a group of upper class Hufflepuffs stood by the doors casting drying charms on everyone entering the castle) Harry found himself with about sixty students who wanted to learn to speak to reptiles. They met in the Great Hall, and the twins arranged with the Hogwarts house elves to move the Gryffindor table away from the fireplace, get cushions and rugs for people to sit on around the fire, and an endless supply of hot chocolate for anyone who wanted it.

Harry and Nott summoned a few snakes, and Harry and Luna went around trying to teach the spell. Luna tried, but Harry had to admit she was a terrible teacher. She started at the end or in the middle, and filled in the rest in a haphazard manner, almost guaranteed to confuse the listener. Harry had her stop trying to teach and just continuously repeating the incantation for groups of students. Harry went around too, and slowly more and more students got the incantation correct. He wasn't sure how many would get it right the next time they tried. He had them keep practicing anyway. As it was getting close to dinner (and the enchantment that created or brought the snakes there ended and they disappeared) the students started singing Christmas carols.

Mike Daly, Muggle-born, was reminded of a comic strip his grandfather had shown him. The characters were a bunch of animals from a swamp in the U. S. ('New World' Harry said to himself) that were singing Christmas carols the same way -- singing the parts they knew, and making up the parts they didn't. As dinner time came, the teachers broke up the gathering (which had only increased throughout the afternoon) and the school had it's final feast before Christmas break.

- - -

The train ride home was without incident. Everyone was excited about the upcoming holidays. Luna and Harry were happy to be going home. Once there, they had a very busy holiday. There were

presents to buy and then wrap; decorations to put up; people to visit; and big dinners to make and clean up afterward.

The first gift that Harry and Luna gave was to Willow the Dryad. They gave her a glass ball for her tree. However, they couldn't get the plant spirit to understand the tradition of decorating a tree.

The family had a Christmas Eve celebration. Luna's uncle Ollie and Mr. Croaker were also there. Aunt Sibyll, who despite being a professor at Hogwarts, Harry had never met, was also invited, but turned down the invitation.

On Boxing Day the Lovegoods went to Sirius' house for what had become an annual event. Hermione and both her parents were there, as were most of the Weasleys (Bill was in Egypt, and Charlie was in Romania and didn't come), Neville and his Grandmother, Narcissa and Draco, and Remus Lupin. There were three other people there that Harry hadn't met before: Andromeda and Ted Tonks, and their daughter Nymphadora, who insisted that people call her Tonks. Harry and Draco suppressed their laughter as they watched her pale face redden when her mother called her 'Nymph.' However, they found out that she knew some of the hexes that Harry had been working on countering in his defense class when he called her that. The look in her eye told him to take her threat seriously when she warned him not to call her that again. The twins didn't believe her, and ended up without elbows for about an hour. Not being able to bend your arms in the middle is rather limiting, Harry realized.

At one point, Draco got Neville, Luna, Harry, and Hermione alone in a room.

"Well, it's time for me to try to bring you around to the pure-blood way of being a bigot," he started.

"And what does this have to do with me?" Hermione asked, a little icily.

"I just wanted to point something out to you. If pure-bloods ruled, and the Muggle-born weren't invited, you would still be smart, right? And you'd still be leading your class, but it would be a Muggle school,

right? So really, you'd be doing almost the same thing as you do now, only without magic."

"But I like magic!"

"Yes, but if you had never hear of it, you wouldn't know that you like it, would you? So you'd be just as happy as you are now. So, guys," he started addressing the other students, "if the pure-bloods were in charge it wouldn't really affect the Muggle-born."

"I object!" Hermione said, forcefully.

"So do I! I'm half-blood. What about us?" Harry asked.

"No, wait a minute, Harry, Hermione," Neville said. "I think Draco has given us all something to think about seriously. Let's go back to the party, and we can discuss this another time. We'll be along in a minute Draco."

They watched the Slytherin leave.

"Do you mind explaining what that was all about?" Hermione asked.

Neville complied, "His father is forcing him to try to convert us to his pure-blood way of thinking. Draco doesn't agree with it, but if he doesn't talk to us about it, he'll be punished. So now he can truthfully tell his father he talked to us, and what we said, and his father will tell him to keep trying, because we haven't told Draco that we reject his ideas. It doesn't hurt us to listen, and Draco doesn't get punished."

"Is it that bad at his house?" Hermione asked.

"His father can't stand to be in the same house as Muggles or what he calls Muggle-lovers, like Sirius or the Weasleys. I think it is that bad for Draco."

Hermione mused, "His mother seems nice."

"Yes, she does," Neville said, and headed back to the rest of the party.

Once again the party finished with a huge game of exploding snap. Harry, many players away from Luna at the magically expanded table, noticed that she wasn't winning. He watched a bit before realizing that she was losing on purpose.

After the party was over, Harry and Luna sat in the parlor of the Meadow drinking hot chocolate before the fire. Harry asked Luna about losing at cards.

Luna explained, "I don't think the game would be as much fun for everyone else if only one person kept winning. Did you see how happy Ron was when he finally won? And the twins when their cheating let them win a game?"

"Does everyone know that the twins cheat?"

"I think most people do. They only really try to stop their parents from noticing."

"Figures."

"It was funny when Tonks got mad at them."

"Yes. Wonder why she made her hair pink?"

"I don't know. It was strange magic, though."

"Really? I would assume it was just a transfiguration."

"Well, yes, and no. It's like your animagus magic. It's part of your aura. Her transfiguration was part of her aura. It wasn't a spell, it was inherent."

"So, you think she can change other parts of her appearance?"

"Yes. But it's like your animagus, or my Sight -- it's just something that's part of us, but we can't really share."

"Oh! I forgot!" Harry exclaimed. "I was going to ask Sirius about becoming an animagus!"

"We'll write him a letter." Luna had a thoughtful look on her face. Harry waited.

In the hall, Selene paused to look at the kids. They sat on the love seat, talking, drinking hot chocolate, seemingly enjoying each other's company. She was content. So far nothing had come between them. She called to them.

"Harry, Luna. I'm going to bed. Bank the fire when you're done in here, and don't stay up too long."

There were a pair of "good night" and "we won't." Selene went upstairs.

A few minutes later, Luna turned to Harry and said, "Harry, I was thinking about that diary. It's intelligent, and we think it possessed Liz and forced her to petrify the cat, or get Slytherin's monster to do it. . . ."

"Yes."

"So I was thinking that it was more dangerous than the others, and we probably should get rid of it sooner rather than later. While all the objects are black, that one has intelligence, too."

"That makes sense. Shall we toss it in the fire?"

"We can, but I think it's warded against it. We can try, though. Either it will work or it won't. There's no danger in trying."

Harry went to his room and was down with the book in short order. They looked at each other, and he tossed it into the fire. They watched it for about 10 minutes, then Luna said, "Well, it's warded, but at least now I can see which ones are the protection from fire. When we go back to school we need to learn as many fire spells as possible so we can remove that ward. But we have to be very careful not to open it!"

They removed it from the fire with the poker, banked down the fire, put their dirty dishes in the sink, and went to bed.

- - -

While Harry was very happy with all his gifts, he was particularly interested in the book on wand making and enchantments that Uncle Ollie gave him. Along with a lot of practical aspects of wand making, it explained the theory of enchanting items. Harry and Luna read and re-read it, and discussed how it might apply to their collection of dark artifacts. As with most things they learned, it led to more questions than answers. They made sure that Harry packed that book when they got ready to return to Hogwarts.

- - -

Sirius took a big breath, reached for the doorknob, and pulled back his hand as if burned. He tried again, and this time succeeded in getting the door open. He had to be crazy to take this job. Admittedly the Christmas party had a lot of people in it, but he knew each and every one of them. (Well, except for Mr. Granger; he hadn't met the man until the Boxing Day party. But he was the only one!) Now they expected him to face a crowded roomful of strangers? To be honest, it isn't anything he hadn't faced before. But that was before years of torture in Azkaban! Years of solitary confinement without seeing another human being!

He forced his legs to keep carrying him. While he wasn't totally familiar with this area, he had been here before. And it wasn't that large. He was soon in a familiar corridor, heading down a well known stairs and finally down the grand staircase of the Entrance Hall. He headed towards the Great Hall and his pace slowed. The doors were open, and sound came flooding out. It was like a physical barrier -- and as he got closer and the noise got louder he had more and more trouble making forward motion.

He reached the door and looked in. There were more people there than he had seen since Azkaban. He couldn't do it. He couldn't go in there. He fled. It appeared like he was just walking away, but he knew

that he was in full retreat. What had he gotten himself into? How could he teach all those strangers!

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, stood and addressed the student body.

"As you are probably aware, Mr. Lockhart is no longer a professor here at Hogwarts. Starting tomorrow we will have a new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, a former Auror -- Mr. Sirius Black."

There was a lot of murmuring around the hall.

Harry turned to Luna, with a smile on his face. "Sirius! This will be great! Hopefully we'll actually learn defense. And we can ask about becoming an animagus!"

Luna had that dreamy look on her face that Harry associated with her illness around the time that school started.

"Yes," she answered, "I think this will be very good for him."

"Uh, Luna? Are you alright?"

She focused on him. "Yes, I'm fine. I want to go to bed. I'm tired."

- - -

The next day, Monday, the Ravenclaw first years had Defense. They eagerly headed from breakfast in the Great Hall to the Defense classroom. There they found Professor Black already in the classroom.

"Hello, Sirius!" Luna called out as she entered the room with Harry.

"Hello, Luna. But while we're at school, I'm afraid that I have to insist that you call me Professor Black."

"Hello, Professor," Harry called happily.

"Hello, Harry," Sirius called back. Luna and Harry got some strange looks from Nancy Bixler, one of her dorm mates.

"You know Sirius Black?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes. He's a friend of the family."

"Before or after he was acquitted?"

"After."

"Oh, that's alright, then."

Sirius called out, "Take your seats, everybody!" interrupting the conversation. "It seems we have a lot of catch up to do. Traditionally, first years learn -- either in class or out -- a set of hexes to use on your friends. We will be learning them and the counter curses. Yes, uh, Mr. Lynch?"

Tom Lynch asked, "Why do we need to learn the hexes? Isn't this defense against the dark arts?"

"None of the hexes you will be learning will qualify as dark. As to why you need to know them -- you'll need to know them so you can practice the counter curses. Good question, by the way.

"Now, let us begin with the tickling charm. How many of you know it? About a third. Can I have a volunteer? Thank you, Luna. Let me show you the spell, then I'll show you the counter curse, then I'll cast it on Luna, and cast the counter."

He pointed his wand at a blank wall, and said, "Rictusempra." Sirius realized that something was wrong. The spell didn't cast, and suddenly he knew that this whole job thing was a mistake. He looked to where someone was coughing.

Harry, seeing that Sirius was looking at him, stopped coughing and quickly went through the wand motion for the spell, keeping his hand

in front of his body, thus blocking most students from seeing what he was doing. Sirius saw the motion, and took a big breath.

"Sorry, it's been a long time since I've done that spell. Probably haven't used it since school -- doesn't have a lot of practical uses, really. Let me try again. Rictusempra!" He accompanied the incantation with a circle, twist, and jab motion. This time a beam of light sped from the wand into the wall.

"And the counter goes like this!"

The lesson continued. Luna did indeed get the giggles when the spell was cast on her. She was just the first, as everyone got multiple chances to cast the hex, and cast the counter curse.

By the time the class was done, Sirius felt much better. Luna, Liz, and Harry stayed behind for a minute, and Sirius thanked Harry for his assistance, giving Ravenclaw some points in the process.

"Professor," Luna said, "can you teach Harry and Liz to be animagi like you?"

Sirius' eyes widened. "What makes you think I'm an animagus?"

"Your aura. It has the same animal magic as Harry, and Liz, and Scabbers, who turned out to be Mr. Pettigrew."

"Well, I can probably give you some pointers -- all theoretical, you understand."

Harry answered, "Thanks, Professor! That would be great. We haven't made much progress, since all the books about it are in the Restricted Section."

"Well, we'll just see about that. I may know one or two that weren't. At least when I was here. Now you better get to your next class."

- - -

After the first class, Sirius wasn't as anxious about the other classes. There were some problems with the Slytherin classes, but with some quick shield spells, and a number of points (and one detention for a sixth year) he got through all his classes over the next few days. It was a lot of work, but once he got past the stress, the work didn't bother him. He still had trouble going to the Great Hall for meals. That was too much for him.

When the Deputy Headmistress explained about detentions in the astronomy tower for upper class students caught in the broom closets, he told her he was a bit surprised. Actually, he was flabbergasted. He agreed with the rules, and that only other professors who knew about it were Flitwick and Sprout, and the need to keep it that way.

He also spent some time in the library, and did find the books that the Marauders used to learn how to become animagi. He stressed to Liz and Harry that it was dangerous, and they should learn a lot more Transfiguration theory before they attempted to change. He helped with finding books about that, too.

- - -

A few days into the new term, Harry was accosted by a large group of older Slytherins. One particularly large (and ugly) seventh year, Marcus Flint, their Quidditch captain, acted as spokesman.

"Lovegood! You know a Parseltongue spell?" he demanded.

"It gives you the power to speak to all reptiles, yes."

"We want you to teach us."

Harry looked around. He was completely surrounded by people who seemed two to three feet taller than him. There was no escape, except one. He took it.

"Sure. How about this Saturday after breakfast in the Great Hall. I'll get Mike Daly and Tracy Davis to help, too." Arrangements made, Harry was allowed to go.

The lesson went similar to the last. A lot of repetition of the Parseltongue phrase to a complete set of the fifth, sixth, and seventh years Slytherins, some people getting it, some giving up in disgust after a while, the snake insulting their accent. In the end, Mike and Harry guessed that less than a third would be able to cast the spell correctly after a few days.

They had regular refresher courses for the first and second years in their study groups. Throughout the rest of the school year Harry, Luna, Mike, Tim Vale, and Mary Shrake would be accosted in the halls for quick reviews of the hiss needed to cast the spell. Only the original three, and Luna, seemed to be able to keep the incantation in their heads. Harry, of course, knew it because he was a Parselmouth.

But the strangest class Harry taught was to a group of professors. At the request of Professor Flitwick Harry, Mike, Tim, Mary, and Luna tried to teach the Headmaster, Professors Snape, McGonagall, Flitwick, Vector, and the Runes instructor how to cast the spell. Everyone except McGonagall eventually got it successfully cast, but only Flitwick was able to keep the hiss pattern in his head to cast it a second time without help. Snape left angry when the conjured snake responded in as insulting manner as Snape had addressed it. His mood wasn't improved as he heard Luna scolding the snake for using such language, and the other professors laughing.

After that, Harry never again heard anyone claim that Luna was the heir of Slytherin.

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As the weeks passed, the fear caused by the attack on Filch's cat disappeared. Mr. Filch was still very angry, and the littlest thing could get you detention, but the students were quick to learn to stay out of his way. The consensus of the school was that the whole thing was a prank. The destruction of the rumors that Luna was the heir didn't hurt either.

Chapter 10 Boom

The first and second years study groups were soon back in business almost every night in the Great Hall. The different houses worked well together. The Ravenclaws were often the first to learn or understand something and taught the others. The Hufflepuffs made sure no one overlooked or left without a chance to learn. The Slytherins (usually Mike Daly and Draco) mostly ran the groups, and offered any shortcuts they saw in learning it. The Gryffindors encouraged everyone.

The teachers (except Snape and Sirius) commented on how well those first two years were doing; the best classes in years. The students themselves commented on how unfair Snape was. The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs felt the class was unpleasant. The Slytherins and Gryffindors claimed Snape was vindictive. The exception was Neville, who even though he wasn't in Gryffindor any more, was still a personal target of Snape.

It came to a head one day when Neville ended up in the Hospital wing again. The groups sat around complaining.

"It's dangerous," Wayne Hopkins, a second year Hufflepuff said. "He stood behind Neville and distracted him when he was supposed to be counting the number of times he stirred. Just before he got it wrong, Snape moved away. He knew what he was doing, and what was going to happen. We came to learn, not be abused!"

"Has anyone spoken to Snape?" Hermione asked.

"I did. After the first class of first year, when he also let Neville get hurt. He wouldn't listen to me. We've hardly spoken outside of class since. He doesn't want to change."

Padma Patril, second year Ravenclaw, asked, "Is there someone else we can complain to? Have you tried talking to your head of house?"

"I did," Hermione said. "Last year, before I changed houses, I complained because Professor Snape docked me points for being an insufferable know-it-all. . . ."

Draco interrupted with a smile, "Which is obviously unfair, since everyone knows you're a very sufferable know-it-all."

"Thank you, Draco, exactly. But Professor McGonagall said there wasn't anything she could do."

"Then there's only Dumbledore," Padma's Gryffindor twin, Parvati said.

"I don't know," Draco said. "My father thinks he's senile. Hasn't anyone complained to him before?"

No one knew if anyone had complained, So a delegation of eight students, one from each house in each year, were given the task of speaking to the Headmaster. A few days later, as dinner was finishing up, eight students approached the head table. They had been waiting for several days for an evening when the Potions professor wouldn't be around. Harry wasn't sure how, but he was appointed spokesman for the group.

"Professor, we would like to schedule a meeting," Harry said hesitantly.

"Good evening, Mr. Lovegood, students. You all want to schedule a meeting?" Some nodded, some said, "Yes, sir."

"One meeting? Or eight?"

"One, sir. We were discussing a problem and thought that two students from each house, one from the first and one from the second year, should meet with you."

"And this concerns a problem with the school?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, are you free at the moment?"

"Yes, sir, we are."

"Then let us remove ourselves to my office."

None of the students had been in the Headmaster's office before. Heads were swiveling everywhere, trying to take in all the magical contraptions, the enormous red bird, the mysterious books on the shelves, and the mess on the great desk.

"Lemon drop, anybody?" John Tunny accepted one, but no one else did. "Now then, what is all this about?"

Half the students glanced at Harry. He sighed inwardly, and began, "Sir, we're here to complain about the unfair, and dangerous, bias of the head of Slytherin house to the students of the other houses."

Dumbledore glanced at the group. Diana Palmer and Draco Malfoy were in agreement. He couldn't brush this off as just another inter-house bit of rivalry. "Dangerous?"

Draco spoke up, "Yes, sir. On at least two occasions he caused, or allowed Neville Longbottom to be hurt." Draco described his first potions class, and meeting with Snape. Wayne Hopkins spoke about what he saw on the more recent accident. Everyone spoke of other incidents, both in class and out.

Dumbledore was not smiling when they were done. "Thank you all for bringing this to my attention. I will speak with Professor Snape and see what can be done to rectify this situation."

"Thank you, sir."

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"Sirius?"

"Yes, Harry, what can I do for you? You haven't read all the transfiguration material I found for you, have you?"

"No, this is something different. I have a bet with someone about who can learn the most fire spells, and I was wondering if you could help me."

"A bet, huh? What are the stakes?"

Harry mumbled something.

"What's that?"

He answered almost too softly for Sirius to hear, "A kiss." He also turned red.

"And you want to win this kiss?" Harry gave a nod.

"Alright! Sure I'll help you. I'm sure that you can get the standard ones, ignite, accelerate, shape, move, extinguish, and the like from the standard books of spells. Hmmm, how's your Latin? Good, then in the library is the Tome of Vulcan, which is all about fire magic. However, I don't want to catch you creating a flame-whip or anything else that will hurt someone! I'll have you in detention so long your children will be done here before you are! And that would be nice compared with what some of the other teachers would do!

"Oh, and good luck with your bet! Just like James. Perhaps a little earlier than James. . . ."

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"You know," Draco said to the combined study groups, "I do believe that the Headmaster has talked to Snape."

Harry looked at the pile of Potions books that they needed for their assignment and agreed, "I think so."

"I wonder if he meant us when he spoke about a 'small group of students spreading vicious lies?'" Hermione asked.

"As first and second years, we are smaller than most of the rest of the students, so I think he did," Luna responded.

"From what I could count from the dinner conversation, he took over fifty points from Ravenclaw today," Liz said.

"At least a hundred from Gryffindor," Ron Weasley added.

"Don't exaggerate, Ron," Hermione said.

"I'm not! He took twenty-five from each twin for making too much noise in the halls. And took bunches from us in class."

"What is our next move?" Mike asked.

"We have another move?" John replied.

"Of course. There's always someone else over everyone. Even the Minister of Magic will give in to public opinion eventually. Who does Dumbledore report to?"

Ron answered, "Rumor has it he talks to the Minister a lot. But it also says he doesn't always answer the Minister's questions."

"The Board of Governors," Draco said. "My father's on it, which doesn't help us any, but we could contact the other members."

"And what do we tell them?" Mary Shrake, first year Hufflepuff asked.

Mike replied, "What we told Dumbledore. We limit ourselves to eyewitness accounts, and the most unfair point taking. Obviously, the magic in the castle automatically adds and removes points from the hourglasses. But is there some sort of record of who gave or took what points, and for what?"

"I can ask Professor Flitwick," Hermione volunteered.

"And I can ask Professor Sprout," Mary offered.

"Good, I'll start work on the draft letter later, and we'll talk about this more tomorrow and you two can tell us what you found. Now, hand me that potions book; we should get to work on this essay."

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"Professor Flitwick?"

"Yes, Miss Lovegood. What can I do for you?"

"I have a bet with a friend about who can learn the most fire spells. I was wondering if you can help me."

"Fire, huh? There is quite a lot of magic involving fire in the standard books of spells, you know."

"Yes sir, we both know that. I was looking for other spells."

"Let me think. . . . I remember! There is a book in the library, The Grimoire of Karnath, that has a large number of fire spells; Baron Karnath was from the northern part of Prussia, if I remember, and liked to be warm. You must be careful, though. Should you be caught, for example, casting a javelin of fire, you will likely get expelled."

"I wouldn't do anything like that, Professor. Thank you!"

- - -

The school did indeed have a magical book that recorded the house points and the reason they were given. The next Saturday, with the permission of Professor Flitwick and under his supervision, a group of students from several houses looked at the book and made extensive notes. If he noticed that all the items read out by Draco and copied by Hermione and Neville were about the head of Slytherin house, he didn't say anything. After a couple of hours of research, they thanked him, and left.

Mike and Hermione were the principal editors, and came up with the final document. They waited a few days until they had a very good turn out for the study groups, and everyone (except Margo Lane, a

first year Slytherin) signed it. Hermione used a charm to create copies on some blank parchment she brought for that purpose, and Draco supplied the list of names of the Governors. He had left his father's name off the list. He knew there would be repercussions, but he also knew he had to stick by his friends.

- - -

As Valentine's Day was approaching, Sirius had a meeting with Professors Flitwick, McGonagall, and Sprout. The result was all four were on duty the night of February 14, and wards similar to the ones on the Astronomy Tower were placed on the Clock Tower and the Trophy Room. Even with three rooms available for detentions, they had trouble getting all the couples time who requested it. They took turns actually patrolling. They were able to report honestly that no students were caught snogging.

- - -

It was a cold, late February day when Harry and Luna met outside to resolve their bet. They walked down the road, almost to the gates, and cast spell after spell. They ignited wood, and burned it with a variety of colored and shaped flames, and at various speeds. They caused fire to burn without any fuel. They created a wall of flames (briefly) and threw some fireballs down the road. That was the only combat spell they used, as the counter spell was part of the D.A.D.A. 4th year class. They counted up the spells, and Harry lost by two. He paid up with a hug and then a kiss. He thought kisses were alright but nothing special, and he preferred hugs. The most important thing about the exercise was that Luna felt that she could now remove the ward against burning from the book. As it was Saturday, she would remove the wards now, and they would burn it in some fireplace right after lunch.

"Why don't we burn it in the common room?" Harry asked.

"There might be a magical discharge as it's destroyed and the other wards fall. I'd rather not be right there when it happens. I'd rather no one be there when it happens."

They headed back to the castle and retrieved the book from Harry's trunk. They found an empty classroom, and Harry and Luna worked on removing the fireproofing ward. Luna described it as "stubborn." Harry thought the way the dark object seemed to refresh the ward indicated "powerful wizard." He began to get nervous, and pushed his magic when it was his turn to try again.

"I think you did it!" Luna exclaimed. "That was much more powerful, and it seems to be gone!"

Harry panted from the exertion. "Good, because I don't think I can do that again for a while. Come on, lunch has already started." He picked up the book, and they made their way to the Great Hall.

They were indeed late. Most of the students had finished already. There was a stranger sitting at the teacher table next to Dumbledore. The man had white hair and a pale, pointed face. Harry and Luna had barely started eating when Dumbledore and the stranger got up and left the hall. He didn't think about the man again until that evening when Draco told Harry it was his father. Harry at the time was thinking of other things. He nudged Luna, and with a motion of his head, indicated the fireplace in the wall behind the Gryffindor table. Luna gave him a smile and continued eating.

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"Lucius, have a seat. Lemon drop? Then to what do I owe this meeting? Does it have anything to do with the summons I received to appear at the Spring meeting of the Governors?"

Malfoy looked surprised. "I have no idea why you are being summoned. However, that just makes things a little easier for me. I want to know what's going on with this Chamber of Secrets business."

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You are being attacked by Slytherin's monster and nothing is being done! This is worse than I thought! How many students will you endanger before you admit that you can't stop this thing!"

"None. No students appear to be in danger. No students have been attacked by any monsters, be they Slytherin's or not."

"Then why are the reports that the Chamber of Secrets was open and the monster attacked someone?"

"I fear the reports you may have heard are exaggerated. Our caretaker Mr. Filch's cat has been petrified. There was also a sign placed on the wall that the Chamber of Secrets had been opened. A short time later the sign was changed to one praising cats. Since then, there has been no incident that leads me to think that this isn't anything except a set of pranks, in somewhat poor taste."

"I still insist that you give a full report of this to the board of Governors! You have a lot to answer for, Dumbledore, if you are endangering our children!"

"I will certainly. . . ."

Due to circumstances beyond his control, the Headmaster never finished that sentence.

- - -

Harry and Luna ate slowly, watching the hall empty out. They put down their forks after the last student left, and got up. They calmly walked around the Gryffindor table, and Harry tossed the diary into the fire. Unlike last time, it started to smoke, and the pages started to char.

"It's catching. Let's go," Luna said.

As they walked out, Harry asked, "Are you sure it's going to be completely destroyed?"

"Yes, I talked to Mum about disenchanting dark objects. I asked if the object itself was dangerous, like a paper with an evil spell on it, what happens to any curses and other spells on it if it were burned. She said that they are destroyed if their object is destroyed." They had

reached the Entrance Hall and were heading up the grand staircase. "She was the one that warned me about the spell backlash."

At that point, probably everyone in the castle heard the explosion. "Run away or run towards it?" Luna asked, in a whisper, even though no one else was around.

"Never run from danger, it only makes you a target," Harry quoted from a fantasy novel they had read (and found disappointing). "Also, we better make sure no one entered the hall after we left." They turned around and headed down the stairs. Professor Snape was coming up the steps from the dungeon as Harry and Luna were coming down.

"You! What did you do?"

"We heard an explosion, and came down to see if anyone was hurt," Harry answered.

"Where did it come from?"

"I don't know, just below us, somewhere."

By that time people were coming into the hall from the west, from the stairs to Hufflepuff's cellar, the dungeons (behind Snape) and more were coming down the stairs. Looking around, Harry said, "Unless someone's running from it, it's that way!" He pointed down the corridor towards the Great Hall. Snape hurried that direction, followed by thirty or forty students, lead by Harry and Luna. They opened the door to the Great Hall, and saw the wreckage.

The first thing of note was the missing fireplace. A large hole to the outside had replaced it. The Gryffindor table was broken in half, the two pieces knocked into the Ravenclaw table, which was pushed halfway towards the Slytherin table. Charred pages fluttered in the cold wind blowing in from outside. Many of the windows had been broken, and there was glass all around the Gryffindor side of the hall.

Snape, who had only taken a step or two into the room, turned upon the students. "I don't know who is responsible for this, but you will be found, and you will be punished! Everybody out!"

As the crowd of students tried to reverse the flow, Dumbledore and Malfoy were pushing their way through the throng. They entered the room and Dumbledore closed the door. Harry and Luna slowly made their way to the Ravenclaw tower.

"Good thing we didn't try this in the common room. We might have taken down the whole tower," Harry said. Luna nodded, but seemed thoughtful. "What's the matter?"

"I'm just thinking. I'll tell you when I've thought it through."

Harry knew better than to try to get her to tell him what she was planning. She wouldn't until she was ready.

He changed topics and asked, "What about the one in the Trophy Room? Should we start researching unlocking charms?"

"No. I have a plan that doesn't involve breaking and entering. But we have to wait until Mrs. Norris is better."

"What!"

"It's an important part of the plan. Trust me."

"I do, but. . . ."

"No 'buts'."

"Yes, Luna."

"Do we have any homework this weekend?"

- - -

Dumbledore, Snape, Malfoy, Flitwick, and McGonagall examined the destruction in the Great Hall.

"What are all these papers, Albus?" asked the transfigurations professor. Most were burned, and what was left were usually little pieces. The ones that weren't charred were covered with writing. They looked as if they had been written on multiple times with different colored ink, and in some cases what seemed different handwriting.

"Dumbledore! I hold you completely responsible for this. What sort of school are you running here?" Malfoy almost looked pleased examining the damage. "You will have a lot to explain to the Governors."

The Headmaster in question was ignoring him, however, and stood with his charms instructor waving their wands around the hole in the wall.

"I would say that this is very curious, Filius. And disturbing."

"I agree, Albus. There is no indication of an explosive spell..." the diminutive man began.

"What do you mean, there was no explosion?" Snape snarled. "What caused all this?"

"Not 'no explosion,'" answered Filius. "Just no explosive spell. The explosion wasn't the goal."

"So someone 'accidentally' blew up the Great Hall," sneered Malfoy.

"So it would seem, Lucius," Dumbledore answered. "So, if they weren't trying to blow up the building, then I think these papers are a clue to what they were trying to destroy."

"Who was trying to destroy what?" asked Snape.

"Whoever threw this book in the fire. I would conjecture that it was a powerful magic item, and someone threw it into the fireplace, whether to destroy it to destroy it, or destroy it to get back at the rightful owner. If, for example, someone had used an extremely powerful Reducto

the spell residue would have been detected. What we find is cutting curses, one of which split the Gryffindor table, and dark spell and ward residue. It seems like a very dangerous item was destroyed."

"If the person who destroyed it did not own it, then we may be able to find out from the owner," Minerva said.

"Yes, I will ask tonight at dinner," Dumbledore answered. "But if the owner knew what it was dark, they probably won't come forward."

McGonagall picked something up. "Albus, look at this. There are several bits around. It appears to be the cover. Black leather, if I'm not mistaken."

Malfoy looked startled. "What? Maybe it was blackened by the fire."

McGonagall looked at what she held in her hand, "No, it appears to be black, without burn marks on it. Some sort of notebook I would think, considering that we haven't found anything but handwriting on the papers."

Malfoy seemed upset. "Well, I have better things to do than stand around here all day. Dumbledore, I'll see you at the meeting!"

Snape finished examining the evidence that McGonagall was collecting. "But if it was such a powerful magic item that its destruction caused this," Snape indicated the damaged room, "why wasn't it warded against fire? It was, after all, only paper."

"That is an excellent point, Severus. And we have seen someone, or rather, some two who have the ability to break wards, haven't we Minerva? If they took off the fire ward, and left the rest, it may explain the explosion, at least partially. Now, I believe we should get to work putting the castle back together. Minerva, please repair the windows. Severus, the tables and chairs, please, and Filius, let us try to rebuild this fireplace."

"Fire wards. . . ."

"What did you say, Filius?"

"Oh, just thinking out loud, Albus. I have an idea I'd like to pursue if no one comes forward tonight."

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"May I have your attention, please! As you no doubt know, there was an accident in the Great Hall this afternoon that did some damage. I would appreciate it if the people who caused it would come forward. Also, there was a black leather bound notebook destroyed in the accident. If you are the owner of this notebook, please see me or your head of house after dinner. Thank you. Enjoy your meal."

Liz's eyes became wide with fear when the diary's description was given.

"What did you do?" she whispered to Luna.

Harry sighed. Several people beside Luna had heard the whisper, and now there was a lot of whispering moving out from the beginning. Harry remembered playing "telephone" in school when he still lived with the Dursleys. He heard enough to know that "Liz thinks Loony had something to do with it" had become "Loony did it" as the story traveled up the Gryffindor table. Before long, even Hufflepuffs were looking towards Luna.

"Luna, I think we better tell Dumbledore. It sounds like everyone else knows."

Luna seemed unconcerned. "He already knows it was an accident. Isn't that enough?"

"I still think we should explain it to him."

"What about me?" asked Liz, nervously.

Luna still seemed unconcerned as she calmed her friend, "You don't have to do anything. After all, you didn't have anything to do with it."

John asked Luna, "So you really blew up the Great Hall?"

Everyone around stopped eating and listened for the answer. "It was an accident," Harry said, and the rumors started moving out from their spot on the table again.

"Luna, we might as well get this over with."

"Can't it wait until after desert?"

"No, I think we should do this now. Come on."

Harry got up from the bench, helping Luna up, too. The noise in the hall started dying down. As they made their way to the head table all talking in the hall stopped. Harry felt every eye in the room was on him, as they approached Dumbledore. He wished Sirius was here; he could use a friendly face, but the defense teacher never came to the Great Hall to eat.

"Ah, Mr. Lovegood, and Miss Lovegood. Would I be correct in assuming that you want to talk about this afternoon's excitement?"

"Yes sir."

"Filius, would you join me?" Dumbledore led them through a door near the teachers table to a meeting room off the Great Hall. After everyone was seated, Dumbledore asked them to tell him the whole story.

"We can't do that," Luna answered, as Harry was taking a breath to begin.

Dumbledore's eyebrows lifted, as he said, "And why not?"

"A big part of it we don't know, and part of it is to protect someone who had nothing to do with today, and part of it is private."

"Why don't you tell me what you think you can tell me, and we'll go from there."

"We're sure it has to do with the attack on Mr. Filch's cat, so we had to do something before anyone else was hurt, and once we did, it was too dangerous to leave around, but we never expected it to blow up, but before that we had to figure out how to get past the wards, and once we learned, we did."

Three sets of eyes stared at Luna.

"Mr. Lovegood," Flitwick said, "Would you mind giving your version of what happened?"

"Uh, yes sir. What happened today was that we destroyed a dark object. But it sounds like we failed, if you found the black diary?"

"I think some things are becoming clearer. The diary was destroyed. Was that the object you were trying to destroy?"

"Yes, it was dark, and intelligent, and we think it possessed someone and caused them to attack Mr. Filch's cat. So, after we got it from, uh, the person, we thought it best to destroy it before it possessed anyone else."

"And the explosion?"

"Spell backlash when the object they were cast on was destroyed," Luna answered.

"I see you have done your homework on this at least," Dumbledore said.

"I think the problem was that with dark magic you can't see how much is there. The other kinds are brighter when they're more powerful; but black doesn't get brighter, and it doesn't get blacker."

"That is why I am so disappointed that you didn't go to a teacher. These things can be very dangerous."

The interrogation continued for over an hour. Luna and Harry refused to give Liz' name, avoided any mention of Harry's connection with the object, and were evasive when asked why they didn't take it to a

teacher. They did have to explain Luna's mage-sight. That led to a long delay in the main thrust of the conversation, the first as the Charms professor asked Luna numerous questions about her ability. They blamed their interest in wards on Luna's experiences with the temple in Greece. They insisted that they hadn't stolen the diary; rather, the owner had given it up willingly because, although he or she didn't know what they did, they were afraid it was evil. Neither they nor the original owner knew how he or she came by the diary.

In the end, they had to listen to a lecture about the dangers of dark objects, they lost thirty points from Ravenclaw, and they got two weeks of detention. They also had to apologize to McGonagall and Snape (they already apologized to Dumbledore and Flitwick).

As they were about to leave, Dumbledore asked, "Do you have any idea who enchanted the book?"

Harry didn't want to tell, and as he thought of what to say Luna answered without hesitation, "I did open the book to the first page where it said 'T. M. Riddle' but closed it right away, just in case."

Harry could tell that Dumbledore knew the name as his face lost the grandfatherly look it had had up until that point.

"Who is that, sir?" he asked.

"He was a student here about fifty years ago. There was some unpleasantness during his time here."

"What sort of unpleasantness?"

"Nothing to concern yourself with. Now go back to your dorm, I'm sure you have an audience waiting for you."

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Lucius Malfoy paced in his study. How could this happen? He had followed the instructions! He gave the book to a first year. He chose a Muggle-born because he knew the student wasn't supposed to survive. Slytherin's monster should have been ravaging the school for

most of the year! But someone had found the book, and destroyed it. He was sure it wasn't Dumbledore nor any of the other teachers in the room. He supposed it could be Black. But if so, why hadn't he said anything when poked his head in the Great Hall? Dumbledore had sent him to monitor the students.

He wasn't sure what the diary was, but he was sure he would be punished if the Master ever returned. He was beginning to have doubts. He was beginning to hope that the Dark Lord never returned.

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Harry and Luna did have an audience. They limited the story to finding a dark object over Christmas break, researching how to get rid of it, and tossing it into the fireplace with unexpected results. They had to repeat the story many times, to various responses.

The Ravenclaws wanted to know what they had to research to destroy it; Harry and Luna did pass along some of their ward knowledge. The Slytherins, for the most part, wanted to know what sort of dark object it was it's powers and abilities were. The Lovegoods protested ignorance of that. The Gryffindors congratulated them on destroying a dark object, except for Percy who insisted that they should have taken it to a teacher right away, and the twins who expressed jealousy because they hadn't thought of blowing a hole in the castle, and now it was too late as it would only be repetitious. The Hufflepuffs picked up on the danger of the object and were thankful that they were protecting the school when they destroyed it.

The detentions were with a number of teachers. For McGonagall, they did lines. For Snape, they cleaned the potions classroom (without magic), which bothered Harry a lot less than Luna.

For Flitwick they had to write lines for a short amount of time, but then had to show the fire spells that they learned for their bet. Harry even showed the fire-whip, which he had only cast once before, just to see if he could do it. The students, in turn, asked about dueling, and the possibility of a real dueling club. Flitwick explained that it was a lot of work for the faculty advisor, because unlike Lockhart's plan, you couldn't have everyone in a single room. But the former duelist was

happy that Lockhart hadn't turned everyone off from dueling. Harry told him about the first years who were interested in it.

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As they were entering the Ravenclaw common room after Flitwick's detention, someone in a group shouted, "I found another!"

Harry walked over to the group and asked, "What did you find?"

Penelope Clearwater, sixth year prefect, answered, "He's the newest Member of the Lockhart club."

"Huh? There's a club for Professor Lockhart?"

"Well, it's an unofficial club. To become a member you have to find a contradiction or provable falsehood in one of his books. Then we send it to the Quibbler, who publishes it, and sends back a certificate."

Harry noticed Luna was smiling. "What?" he asked her.

"I suggested to Daddy that he do that, after their letters to the Prophet didn't get published."

One of the other sixth year students added, "We figure, we had to pay for all these books, we might as well get something useful out of them." Other students in the group nodded.

"Good luck," Harry said, and headed for bed.

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Sirius just took them into his office to talk to them. He got a lot more of the story than they gave Dumbledore (but the kids still kept Liz' name out of it, as well as Harry's connection to the object). He insisted that they get help if they ever came across another dark object. Harry was going to change the subject or give a vague answer -- he hadn't decided which -- but was surprised when Luna agreed.

He reluctantly agreed, too, and got another lecture on the dangers of evil enchantments.

After their detention, Harry asked Luna why she agreed to get help with the dark objects. She wouldn't talk in a public place. Harry glanced up and down the empty hall and looked at Luna quizzically. She led him to an empty classroom and cast a spell in a circle around them.

"What was that?"

"A privacy ward. You didn't think I'd been doing all that research and hadn't learned how to cast a ward, did you? It won't last, though. Only about 10 or 15 minutes."

"Fine. Now, will you tell me why you agreed to get help?"

"If I ever come across another dark object, I'll get your help immediately."

"Oh."

"But Harry, I don't think we can do this alone any more."

"Why not?"

"The last one was paper. We can get past anti-fire and anti-water wards. The locket and the cup won't burn or dissolve in water. I think we should ask Mum."

Harry thought quietly for a few minutes, then answered, "After what happened to the book, I think you're right. When we get home, we get her help to destroy them."

"Thank you, Harry. But we have another problem. The award in the Trophy Room, we can't steal it any more."

"Why not? I thought you had a plan?"

"I did. We would get detention. . . ."

"That part's done."

"Until we get assigned to clean the trophies, like Ron had to do that time, and then I was going to distract Filch by playing with Mrs. Norris, while you hid it. I thought you could levitate it to the top of a case or something, and we would get it later."

"That's a pretty good plan, except for the playing with Mrs. Norris part. Do you think that feline snitch would play?"

"It wouldn't matter; I just have to keep Filch occupied."

"But you said it won't work."

"Yes, because sooner or later someone is going to notice, and when it gets back to the Headmaster he'll remember that T. M. Riddle is associated with us. We can't do it any more."

"So what are we going to do?"

"We have two choices. We can tell someone that it's dark, or we wait and tell Mum about it."

"If we tell Dumbledore, he might find the connection to me. I don't want to do that."

"Good, then we'll leave it alone. It's been there for fifty years, it can sit a little longer."

"Luna, I love you."

"And I love you too, Harry."

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They did get a chance to clean the trophies before their detentions ran out. They discovered a flaw in Luna's plan. She tried to rearrange the trophies, awards, and metals, but Filch seemed to know

where every one was supposed to go. They decided that they probably couldn't just hide Riddle's without Filch realizing it right away.

They also got a letter from Selene with the usual parental disapproval of what they had done. They wrote back that they would explain everything when they saw each other face to face.

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The excitement and rumors of the explosion were soon overshadowed when several members of the board of governors showed up for three days in a row. They sat in on classes, sat with students during meals, and had meetings with teachers. The Lovegoods got to meet Mr. Patil, who had twin daughters in second year, one in Ravenclaw, and one in Gryffindor, both of whom were regular members of the second year study group. He even sat in on the study groups after dinner. When he asked about the letter they had sent about Professor Snape, the rumors of his imminent sacking started spreading throughout the school.

It seemed that Snape heard the rumors, too, because he became as grumpy as he had been after Dumbledore's talk. They worked at his extra long essays ignorant of the order he had received to appear at the board meeting.

Dumbledore, too, was uneasy. He was given no information on the goal of the board members who visited the school except that they were "fact finding." He didn't think his job was in jeopardy, but he was completely in the dark. Even his friends on the board weren't telling him anything.

When the spring meeting did come, held in the meeting room off the Great Hall on the day most students left for Easter Holiday, Dumbledore and Snape sat, ill at ease.

Mrs. Fergison, the chairwoman, started the meeting.

"We will begin with new business. Professor Snape, some complaints have been made about your teaching style. Would you care to say anything before we get into specifics?"

"Potions is a very dangerous class, and I do not allow frivolous behavior. If the students dislike my lack of tolerance of such actions in class, that is too bad. I will accept their dislike if it ensures their safety."

"Well, that's the rub, isn't it? It seems that certain students that everyone agrees you dislike, are prone to be hurt in your class. Please, we've checked the hospital records for the past several years, and certain students repeatedly end up hurt in your class."

"Students with no aptitude for potions! Of course they're the ones who get hurt!"

"That's why we went back so many years. We wanted to find a sample that we could get independent confirmation on their skills, namely OWL and NEWT results. Do you know what they showed?"

"I'm all ears."

"The majority of those students received a grade of Acceptable. Some even received exceeds expectations. One made outstanding and continued on in NEWT Potions until he was, in his words, "hounded out by your unfair treatment." We also interviewed several of his classmates who concurred. Including at least one Slytherin."

Dumbledore tried to intervene, "I have complete confidence in Professor Snape. He has been teaching here for twelve years with very few complaints."

"Really? There was a complaint made in January, wasn't there?"

"Yes, there was," the Headmaster admitted.

"And what was done about it?"

"I spoke to Severus."

"And this did what?"

"I assumed he would stop his unfair treatment of the students."

"Did you check?"

"He's an adult. I don't need to check on him. We discussed the complaint."

"Professor Snape, in what way did you modify your behavior after the discussion with the Headmaster."

"I told him I would give it the consideration it was due, which is none. I am not going to change my teaching methods because some student whines."

"Were you also informed that part of the complaint was the way you gave and deducted points? Did that change after your discussion?"

"No. But I am fighting an uphill battle here. Three quarters of the school thinks that 'Slytherin' mean 'dark wizard' or 'dark witch.' We are discriminated against, insulted, abused. If I didn't favor my house, we would have no chance at all in the house competition."

"Let's address that last bit first. The other three heads of house gave a combined 1673 points since Christmas break. Of that number they each favored their own house by less than thirty points. Only Hufflepuff even reached the 30 point number because Professor Sprout takes a keen interest in her students and rewards them when they show the loyalty and hard work that her house exemplifies. Both Professors Flitwick and McGonagall are less involved with the day to day activities, and give most of their points out in class. How many points did you award to other houses since Christmas, Professor Snape?"

He mumbled something.

"What was that?" asked Dumbledore. Snape just glared at him.

Mrs. Fergison answered, "He said, 'none.' Do you wonder why the other houses hate Slytherin? Do you realize that that's not true?"

Snape looked up. "What?" he exclaimed.

"It seems a group of first and second years that comprise almost three quarters of each of those classes have been meeting regularly in inter-house study groups. They all seem to get along fine, including the Slytherin members."

Lucius Malfoy couldn't contain himself, "What? Slytherins working with the other houses?"

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy. Isn't it wonderful? They are getting along without house rivalry, helping each other. No one thinks the Slytherins are dark wizards in those groups. But back to the matter at hand.

"Professor Snape, you are under notice. If your behavior doesn't change, you will no longer be employed to teach our children. We will re-evaluate you at the end of term and make our decision concerning next year at that time."

"I will not be intimidated!"

"That does seem to be what you like to do, intimidate children. This school is not your playground where you can bully children smaller than you. If you can't act professionally, you will be let go. You may leave."

"Albus. . . ?" Snape began.

"Better go, Severus. I think it's my turn."

And it was. Lucius Malfoy tried to make the case that Dumbledore should go, even using the continued employment of Snape as part of his argument, but most of the rest of the board wasn't giving credence to his arguments. Dumbledore deflected questions about the Chamber of Secrets (if someone had really opened it, wouldn't they have done more than paralyze a cat?), a Parselmouth student (the student in question definitely isn't a Parselmouth, or if she was, so were about sixty other students), and the explosion (much bigger in the retelling than in actuality, why I've heard people say a whole wing of the school was blown up!). In the end, only three people

voted with Malfoy to remove Dumbledore. All were known cronies of Malfoy.

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The train ride home for the break was fun. Most of the first years had become friends, and did a lot of moving between compartments as they visited with each other.

When they reached the station, Selene and Larry were there to meet them. A reporter from the Prophet tried to interview the students, but their parents wouldn't let him near them. While their parents tried to hustle them to the public fireplaces to floo home, the reporter called out, "Is it true you blew up the Great Hall?"

Luna, acting quicker than her parents could counter, yelled back, "Don't be ridiculous. No one blew up the Great Hall. But I suppose that's the kind of misinformation the Prophet is getting known to print."

They made it home without another incident.

Once there, they had dinner, and talked about the term so far. It was mostly about classes and classmates, who won the latest Quidditch match, and things like that. Finally, Luna looked at Harry and some sort of communication passed between them. They lost their smiles, and Selene knew that the rest of the conversation would be important.

"Mum? I'm not sure what Dumbledore wrote to you, but here's the real story. We came across a dark object at school, researched how to destroy it, and then did. It was a book, and we removed the ward against fire, and tossed it into a fireplace. When it burned, it blew up, damaging the Great Hall. But that's not the important part.

"We couldn't take it to the teachers because it would mean they might find the connection between Harry and the dark objects."

"What connection?" Selene asked.

Harry sat, looking down, while Luna explained the black lines attached to the spell damage in his forehead, and how that had led her to the book.

Selene, who had seen the lines years before, (and had found nothing in her research) said, "So there may be more dark objects out there attached to the other lines?"

"There are. We found another at the school - it's an award a student received about fifty years ago, the same student who owned the diary. We can't get to it, because it's locked up and behind magical protection in the Trophy Room."

"I remember that place," said Larry. "Had to clean those trophies quite a few times while I was in school. It usually wasn't my fault, though." he added quickly.

Selene said, "That's two of the lines. Do you have any ideas about the others?"

Luna looked at Harry again, and nodded to the stairs. Harry got up, and went upstairs for a moment and came down with the cup and the locket.

"We found this one hidden in a cave near Portsmouth. And this one was hidden in Sirius' house."

Selene and Larry started casting spells. Larry finished first.

"Well, they're dark, alright. What they do, I couldn't tell you, but they're both heavily protected against anything that would hurt them. And I think they're spelled to try and hurt someone back should they get past the protection. I wonder if that wasn't part of what caused the explosion."

Selene added, "Very heavily warded. And with a magic I've never seen. I know you want to keep this secret, but may I show one of these to Mr. Croaker? He's much more experienced than I am with dark objects."

Luna looked at Harry, and he answered slowly, "Alright, but please keep it hidden. These look valuable, and I don't want someone trying to steal them for their value. They're both made out of gold."

Larry picked up the cup. "And this one has the symbol of Helga Hufflepuff. Very interesting. While this one has a snake symbol -- Slytherin? Wonder what the other two are?"

Selene answered, "Two of the others are the award and the book -- nothing founder related there. What was the name on the award?"

"T. M. Riddle."

"I know that name." Larry said, turning pale.

Selene asked, "Who is it?"

"The leading candidate for the real name of V...V...You-Know-Who."

"Voldemort?" asked Harry, and watched Larry cringe. "Does the name Voldemort bother you Luna?"

"No, Voldemort doesn't bother me," she answered, knowing what he was doing.

Unfortunately, so did Selene. "Stop it, both of you. When you find out what his followers did to people who said his name, you might appreciate what sort of world we were living in. Now leave your father alone!"

They discussed details, but a lack of information limited them. They eventually put the objects away, and went to bed.

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"Algie? Do you have a few minutes?"

"Of course, Selene. What can I do for you?"

"What can you tell me about this?"

"Hmmm. Gold cup. Two handles. Badger. Nice. What else is there to this?" He waved his wand, looked puzzled, and waved some more. He looked up sharply. "Where did you get this?"

"My children found it in a cave. I got the impression that it was guarded in some way, but they won't tell me the details."

"They accidentally found this? Hard to believe. This thing is better protected than. . . ." He looked closer, and cast more spells.

Selene asked, "Do you know what that magic is? I've never seen anything like that, and I'd thought I'd seen just about every genre of magic there is."

"I wouldn't expect you to have seen anything like that. That's soul magic. Very rare, very dangerous, very dark. Haven't seen anything like that since Ganeel Isher back in '55. She tried to cheat death by storing part of her soul. . . ."

"What?"

He looked at her. "This is a horcrux! This holds a piece of someone's soul so they can't really die. Do you have any idea who this belongs to?"

Selene nodded. "We have to keep this quiet, though. This has implications for my family."

Croaker nodded. "I'm an Unspeakable. I can keep a secret."

"Alright. This is probably Voldemort's. And he has several others, too."

Croaker stared at her, in open mouth astonishment. "Hang on, I'll clear my afternoon. This could be big. And this could be dangerous."

"We already know these are. Did you hear about the explosion at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, I saw the Prophet's story. I was going to ask you about it until I saw what happened to Stout when he asked you."

"They didn't get many of the facts right. Wait until you read the next Quibbler. It has a much truer story. The whole issue will be devoted to how sloppy the Prophet's reporting is. I'm not sure the story about the Gulping Plimpies will do much for the Quibbler's credibility, though. But anyway, Harry and Luna discovered another -- horcrux, did you say? -- horcrux at the school, made from a diary. They removed the anti-fire wards and tossed it into a fire. It didn't go with a whimper."

They talked all afternoon. Selene brought out the other horcrux, the golden locket. Croaker discovered something that had been overlooked: Each horcrux was connected to the others. Each horcrux had five black connections. Two were big, and the other three were almost too small to see. They could, once they knew what to look for, see the complete connection between the cup and the locket.

"Then why is Harry connected with these? That's how Luna found them -- she could follow the line from Harry until she found the horcrux." She started to look panicked. "Why is Harry connected to these things?"

"I don't know. I don't much about horcruxes. They're obscure and the knowledge is restricted. I'll need to do some research. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Selene. And don't worry about Harry. If it hasn't hurt him yet, then I don't expect it to hurt him over the next few days."

Selene left, not very comforted.

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"Good morning, Algie."

"Good morning Selene. Let's go into my office."

"What did you find?"

"The Dark Lord Raugost in the 12th century is reported to have destroyed himself when he created a seventh horcrux after one of his others was destroyed. It seems that you can only split your soul so many times before you break it irrevocably. So Voldemort has one more chance, assuming any others weren't destroyed before your children started collecting them."

"Why six? That's not a magical number." Selene pondered.

"Seven pieces of soul -- six in the horcruxes, one in the body."

"But back to what I learned. The horcruxes themselves are easy enough to destroy, just destroy the object. But as your children found out, Voldemort made sure that that was difficult. And potentially deadly to the one who destroys it."

"What about Harry and his connection?"

"I have two theories. One is that Harry is a horcrux."

"NO!"

"I don't think so, either, and it's easy enough to test. We just have to see if there's any soul magic associated with his scar."

"I would swear there isn't."

"Then the other theory, and this is only a theory, because it's never been tested, is that Harry is connected to Voldemort's soul because the Dark Lord was going to use Harry's death as part of the horcrux ritual. But there's no record of anyone wounding someone while trying to kill them as part of creating a horcrux. So we're in uncharted territory here. You see, the creation is a multi-part ceremony: part done before a ritual murder, which I'm guessing Harry was going to be, and part done afterward. He never finished, so that may be why Harry's connected the way he is."

"Assuming this theory is correct, then how do we get Harry disconnected?"

"One way is to destroy all the horcruxes, and kill Voldemort."

"We want that to happen anyway. . . ."

"Other than that, some sort of unbinding ritual. It would still be better with as many of these things destroyed as possible."

"Does You-Know-Who know when we destroy these things?"

"To the best of my knowledge, no. But who knows, really. Usually, when Dark Lords are losing their horcruxes, they are losing, and aren't too interested in letting the world know what's going on. They create horcruxes to avoid having to leave anything to posterity."

They discussed the theory and practice of horcruxes for a while longer. In the end, Selene summed things up.

"We'll destroy the two we have, collect the third from Hogwarts at some point, destroy that, then re-assess the situation. We can either try to find the last one, or perform an unbinding ritual."

"Let me look into a few things. I have a feeling these are going to be hellishly hard to destroy. But I might get us official funding."

"You're kidding!"

"No. After all, keeping the wizarding world safe is part of our mandate."

Selene laughed, "And if it helps our families, so much the better."

- - -

Algie came over to the Meadow and talked with Harry and Luna about their plans. They would keep the objects secret, and destroy them. Algie also checked Harry, and declared that he was not a horcrux. The declaration made more sense to the two first years after he had explained what it was. They were told to leave the award alone, the adults would find some way to get it.

- - -

After they got back to school the students quickly noticed a change in their potions instruction. Snape was as quick as always to remove points, but he was even handed -- the Slytherins found themselves on the receiving end of his ire, too. But the really interesting thing was that he no longer hovered over the students. He stayed in front, observing the whole classroom. And the most amazing thing was that he offered suggestions, or gave further instructions when they seemed called for. He would warn a student if they weren't keeping count on the number of stirs. He would tell one student to show another the proper way to prepare a material if someone was having trouble. He gave points for successful potions, and even gave points (but fewer) for mostly correct potions. If someone did a good job helping another student they would receive some points. If they did a poor job, they would lose some.

Padma and Parvati informed the study groups what took place at the Governors' meeting. Ron thought it was funny, until Lavender Brown, another second year Gryffindor, pointed out that he had still lost a number of points in Potions that very day. And he could no longer blame it on Snape's anti-Gryffindor bias.

- - -

The rest of the school year went quick, and Harry and Luna stayed out of trouble. The fifth and seventh years weren't enjoying their year. As the term was winding down they had a second Defense class added to their schedule. They were woefully behind where they were supposed to be, and Sirius felt the only way they could get good grades on their OWLs and NEWTs was by having extra classes.

The first and second years were glad they weren't under that sort of pressure. Their end-of-term exams were enough.

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Final exams came and went. The day after the last one Harry and a group of first and second year boys were playing wand tag on the lawn. The game was a lot like regular tag, but you didn't touch the

person to make them "It", you cast a spell on them. Harry was good at the game, and let himself be "it" more than he had to; he liked practicing casting spells at moving targets.

While they were playing, Algie Croaker interrupted the game. Harry was a little surprised when some of the older students addressed him as "Professor." Neville and Harry left the game to meet him. He was there on business, and was taking the opportunity to say hello to his grand-nephew. Neville and he talked for a few minutes before the old wizard went into the castle.

- - -

"Algie! What a pleasant surprise. Filius told me you wanted to see me? Is there a reason we're not meeting in my office?"

"Hello, Albus. Yes. I would like to get into this case please."

"A trophy case? Why?"

"This is official business, Headmaster. Could you please open this for me?"

"Yes, very well. Here you go."

Croaker waved his wand a few times. Then he started a systematic, magical examination of every object in the case. When he was done he took out Riddle's award for special services to the school.

"Did you know that you had a dark object stored in this case?"

Dumbledore looked shocked. "I never knew!" he exclaimed. "How did you know?"

"You know I can't tell you that, Headmaster."

"Well, can you tell me if there are any more such objects in the school?"

"I can tell you that I don't know of any. However, you may know more of things like the Chamber of Secrets than I."

"May I ask what you are going to do with that?"

"Destroy it, of course. Did you have another suggestion?"

"No. Just making sure."

"I would prefer it if no one knew about this."

"So would I, Algie. Thank you."

- - -

In a decrepit, old mansion in Little Hangleton a spirit grew uneasy. It felt that there was something out there, trying to get it. It was true that it couldn't detect the destruction of the horcrux, but in some subtle way, its destruction had affected the being. It knew it had to get a body back. It was just luck that it had found someone willing to let it into their mind once. Very few people, muggle or magical, would grant that permission, and so it waited. But it felt that it could wait no longer. It would have to journey out and try and find help. It mentally shuddered. That would mean leaving the safety of its lair. Desire for, well, everything, warred with the need for safety. It didn't move.

- - -

"Well, goodbye Minerva. I'll see you in a month or so."

"Where are you off to this time, Albus?"

"Japan! The Land of the Rising Sun! It's a very important country in the Muggle world, and if Harry's still being raised by Muggles it's a good place to start."

McGonagall snorted. Start? This is the fourth summer in a row he'll spend searching for Harry Potter. He'd already looked into the schools in the New World, Australia, and Europe (one forgets just how many small schools there are on the continent).

"If anything comes up, I'll owl you, Albus. Changing the subject, did you find someone to replace Sirius? It's such a shame; he was a good instructor."

"Actually, it was a suggestion from Sirius that got us next year's professor. An expert on dark creatures -- his friend Remus Lupin."

"That should be interesting. He was a good student. Have a safe trip, Albus."

"You have a good summer, too, Minerva."

- - -

The train ride home was as chaotic as the ones around Easter break. Harry had moved around a lot to talk to as many of his friends as possible. Luna stayed in one place with a small group of friends, and they received a lot of visits from people like Harry. As the train was getting close to the station, Harry came back and sat with Luna, Liz, and Hermione. They said their goodbyes as the train came into the station, with promises from Harry and Luna to include their new friends in the summer get-togethers.

There were no reporters at the station this time, and after another round of good byes, Harry and Luna headed home with her parents.

That night, the family sat quietly in the living room, all talked out. Harry brushed Luna's hair when she asked, "Harry, what's wrong?"

"I've been thinking. . . ."

"There's nothing wrong with that! You should do it more often." He laughed, realizing he had fed her the opportunity.

"But really, what's wrong?"

"It's being here. I don't feel home. Not anymore. We just spent ten months away, except for short vacations. This is just a longer break,

and we'll be gone in about two months. It just doesn't feel the same anymore."

Selene asked, "Do you feel Hogwarts is home now?"

"No. That's not home, either. I don't know what I mean."

Selene said, "I think what you're experiencing is some growing up. You're not the same person you were when you left here last September. You're different, so your feelings are different. Being away so much is just driving home the point that you'll be leaving here for good, one day. You'll get your own place, and make that a home. I sometimes wonder if the Muggles don't postpone this by not sending their children away for school. But I think it still eventually happens to everyone.

"Harry, you're growing up, and your feelings are changing, but no matter what you feel, this will always be a home for you. A home is where your loved ones are, and we love you."

"And I love you too, Aunt Selene, Uncle Larry."

They said their goodnights and soon went to bed.

Chapter 11 The Prisoner of Azkaban

At some level was the knowledge that the prisoner was asleep, but that state of affairs wouldn't last. The cold crept into the prisoner's awareness and the dream of being outside was torn away, leaving the image of the Master.

"Crucio!" The memory of being subjected to the pain curse permeated the prisoners' mind.

"Remember the price of failure! Crucio!"

"But I haven't failed you Master. Why do you punish me?"

"You question ME? Crucio! Learn your place."

"Yes, Master."

"Crucio!" This time it wasn't the Dark Lord's voice. And the child who received the curse screamed as all who are subject to it scream. This one was too young to understand, but that didn't matter.

"Crucio!" There were multiple voices casting it this time, as memories merged. The high pitched voice of the Dark Lord, and the long unheard voice of the prisoner. The cries, too, were merged, the child's screams, and the prisoner's own when experiencing the Cruciatus.

"Crucio!" This time there was just one voice. The same voice casting and screaming. Giving and receiving what some have described as the worst pain the human body can experience. Caster and target. Perpetrator and victim. Again and again and again.

The image faded. The Dementor was moving away from the cell.

- - -

It was the first week of summer vacation. Selene had bought a small chest with a magic lock. That was where the kids' wands were kept when they weren't using them for supervised work. Harry and Luna

did not let her parents know how frustrated they felt about that, but had to admit that Selene was pretty smart.

The days fell into a routine: breakfast (Harry had gotten out of the habit of making it, but soon was helping most mornings), yard work, school work (Selene still made them work on their penmanship, geography, mathematics, and reading, and even though they would have done that on their own, she also required that they learn the classics.) Around the house they also practiced the languages that they had magically learned; magic had helped teach them, but would not help them retain the knowledge, so they practiced both reading and speaking French, German, Greek, Latin, and Spanish.

Harry, with some suggestions from Mike Daly (who he owed), finally started reading the Bible, beginning with the Septuagint. Thus he merged his classics reading with reinforcing his Greek. He bounced around in the various books and found some of the stories in Genesis interesting, but others strange. Why did Jacob have to steal his father's blessing? And why did he eventually profit from it, if stealing was wrong? The names in the books of Kings were too many to keep track of. The story of Tobias was interesting, but Harry didn't think the spell given would really drive away demons. He felt the book of Tobias would have made a more exciting story if it had been written a bit different. Maybe it was the ancient Greek. And why did people talk about the patience of Job? He spent most of his book complaining. The book of Wisdom did have a lot of wisdom in it, he thought. He also read parts of the Canticle of Canticles to Luna. She seemed to have a different perspective on it than Harry, and thought having her eye compared with doves was sweet. Harry couldn't think of why comparing her hair with a flock of goats was romantic, but Luna seemed to. She did sadly look at her chest, and apologize that her breasts weren't like fawns of a gazelle. That was another analogy that didn't resonate with Harry, but he reassured her that he was sure they would grow, but didn't think they'd resemble a gazelle fawn.

During their second week home, Selene showed them an article in the Daily Prophet. The paper was holding an essay contest for school children. Selene insisted that they enter. The subject was the importance of the History of the Magical World. Harry groaned. Couldn't they have picked an interesting topic? Harry's essay

reflected his lack of interest in the subject. Luna's was less formal, and touched on many very obscure bits of history, some of which Harry couldn't find in their History of Magic books and wasn't totally sure happened.

The parents organized the first play party on the third Saturday after school ended. At Harry's request, Mike Daly was included, and at Luna's request Elisabeth Ericson came with her parents. It was held at the Lovegoods'. The Daly and Ericson parents, like Hermione's the year before, finally got a chance to see what the wizarding world was like, Mike's more than Liz'. He lived in London, and brought his parent by floo from the Leaky Cauldron. Liz lived less than thirty km south in Sidmouth, so they drove. The Weasleys, Grangers, Longbottoms, and Malfoys (at least the social ones) were also there. The parents sat around talking parent things while the children played Quiff or just ran around.

Selene had to give an explanation of her children "blowing up" the Great Hall. She explained that finding dark objects in Hogwarts was not a normal occurrence, and her children's actions, while noble, were inappropriate for children. She reassured the other parents that they would get adult involvement if anything like that happened again.

The children were even allowed to show off their broom skill, using Luna's and Harry's training brooms. When she saw the children flying, Mrs. Granger was both frightened for them, and unsympathetic to Hermione's fear of heights. The other parents looked at each other behind her back, and those that knew Hermione deduced that part of her drive to excel was to gain her mother's approval.

The children went to bed tired that evening.

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July was fairly uneventful for the first half. All across the group of friends people were preparing or going on vacations. In the Lovegood residence, they got ready for their summer get away to the New World. There was a big to-do when the Weasleys won the Daily Prophet Galleon Drawing and they started to make plans to go to Egypt. Hermione's family went to France shortly after the Lovegood's

party, and Draco and his mother went to a family property on the North Sea. Neville wrote Harry that he was visiting some relatives, but not for any overnight trips. He expressed some jealousy about all the places his friends were going. He did talk happily about the extra responsibility he was given in the manor's greenhouse.

The weekend before they left for the New World, Mike held a birthday party. He invited the entire first year class. About half were able to make it. Unlike the other parties, this one was held in a Muggle neighborhood. His mother, a witch, had the house connected up to the floo network for the day. The wizarding children ate food cooked over a charcoal bar-b-queue, were introduced to computers, and watched a movie. Harry got a special tour of the kitchen, where he found out about a number of household appliances that the Dursleys never had (and the wizarding world didn't have, either.)

After the party, Harry brought up the idea of a big birthday party for him. Since his "official" birthday was just after school started, he thought he could get a party shortly before school started. Selene said she'd talk it over with Larry and let him know. A few days later they talked with Harry about the party. They agreed, but didn't think they could hold it at their place -- the yard was too small to hold thirty kids, never mind the house should it rain that day. Right before they left on their trip Larry informed Harry and Luna that they had made an arrangement with Neville's grandmother to hold the party at the Longbottom Manor.

- - -

"Hello, Mum."

"Hello, Leo. It was nice getting your invitation to lunch."

"I know that during the school year you usually can't get away. With school out, I figured we could spend more time together. "

"Thank you, that would be nice. How's Ophelia?"

"She's working. I'm trying to spend less time at work, but I think she's spending more time at her job in revenge."

" Sigh . Is there anything I can do?"

"Unfortunately, not. We just have to work this out between ourselves. How have you been?"

"Busy. It seems sometimes that the title "deputy" should be dropped from 'Deputy-Headmistress.' With the Headmaster gone so much of the summer, I don't get much of a break."

"Is that normal?"

"No. Just the last few years. He's searching for Harry Potter. This summer he's in Japan. What?"

"Nothing."

"Leonidas Lambert McGonagall! You tell me what you're smiling about!"

"I'm sorry, I can't. Doctor/patient privacy and all that."

Minerva McGonagall clenched her teeth. "Well, what can you tell me?"

"Harry Potter's physically healthy, at least when I saw him. He's magically powerful. And the people raising him know that certain people are still after him."

"You mean the headmaster?"

"No, the followers of You-Know-Who."

Minerva shuddered.

"So they're keeping him safe. . . . And he's your patient?"

"Not really. I've only seen him once for magical exhaustion. . . ."

"Magical exhaustion! How can a twelve year old become magically exhausted?"

"He was only nine, and he cast a very powerful spell to save his guardian. Quite the feat! But his guardians want his location kept secret, so I will. Sorry, Mum."

"Well, if there are certain people after him, I think that's a very wise thing to do. Well, thank you for that information. It's been a mystery that's been driving Albus crazy."

"I hope in a few years they can drop the disguise and he can become himself again, but in the meantime he can grow up in blissful anonymity."

"Well, that's certainly news. What else? When can I expect grandchildren?"

"Mum!. . ."

- - -

Vacation time came swiftly. The Lovegoods took an international portkey to Washington, D.C. for the "Muggle" portion of their trip. They visited the Smithsonian Institution for two whole days. The old cars exhibit was interesting. They found a middle aged Muggle whose grandfather had told him personal stories about the cars in the exhibit.

"Somewhere here is a car here that drove my grandfather off the road. I was too young when he told me about it to remember the type. He did tell about a steam car similar to one here that a neighbor of his had when he was a boy. They lived near a hill, and his father always had to go to a lower gear to get up the hill, but the steam car just chugged up it seemingly without caring. Now-a-days, I bet you don't even have a manual transmission -- most cars don't.

"But do you realize the changes that have occurred in the last hundred years? When my great grandfather was born there were no cars. When my grandfather was born, there were no airplanes. When my father was born there were no jet planes or rockets bigger than

fireworks. When I was born no man had gone into space. What will the world be like when your children are born?"

Mr. Lovegood laughed. "In our part of England things are pretty much as they've been for a long time. Seems like very little changes there. If our children stay in the area it will be very similar to how our parents lived."

"Well, that's amazing," the American answered. "There's a lot to be said for a simpler lifestyle. But your trip here wouldn't have been possible without the technology built over the last hundred years. Unless you came by ship?"

Mr. Lovegood shook his head. "No, not by ship," he said.

"So how did you like the flight over?" he asked the children. The adult Lovegoods looked at the children with a "you know what's expected" look.

"I love to fly," Harry answered.

"I think it's alright," Luna said.

The Muggle smiled at Harry, "I've flown probably a dozen times. First time was around your age. I still find it exciting to fly. Well, enjoy your visit! Have a good flight home."

Later the parents congratulated the kids for their answers.

"Uncle Larry? It seems sad that he can't really fly."

"Yes, Harry, it does. It's just one of those unanswered mysteries of the world: why do some people have magic, and others don't?" They went into a display where a simulator let you attempt to land a plane on an aircraft carrier. "And why do they come up with so many strange ideas?" he said, gazing at the computer generated image of the aircraft carrier as a Muggle child crashed the plane into the stern of the ship.

They were totally confused by the computer exhibit. The gems and stones held an unexpected surprise, though. While looking at the Hope Diamond, Luna commented that it had a dark aura. The sign next to the display mentioned the curse, and when no one was looking Larry cast some detection spells.

"Yes, you're right. There is a curse on that stone. Subtle. Causes loss of trust and argumentative behavior, probably leading to violence or stress problems in the family. I suppose now that the government owns it, it should be alright, don't you think?"

Not being citizens, the government buildings held very little interest beyond architecturally. They took a train to Boston to visit the wizarding government of the New World. They found the train very different from the Hogwarts' Express.

The New World was a colony of the British Ministry of Magic until 1867. When the Muggle Government decided Canada was to become independent, the wizarding government scrambled to unite the various groups into a cohesive nation. The French wizards in Quebec and Louisiana, the Spanish wizards in Florida and California, and the many native groups came together with the English wizards into a single entity now known as the New World. Stretching from the Inuit shaman in the north to the borders of the Aztec nation in the south, the New World had the only all-wizard city in the world (New Goetry, in the Canadian Rockies). They were a more democratic and less class bound society, than the old world magical governments.

Once, the entire government was in the magical section of Boston. But with a population that increases by immigration from around the world as well as mixed marriages (over three quarters of the magic users in the New World are married to Normals, their word for Muggles, as opposed to less than a quarter in Great Britain), the population required more room for a bigger government. The legislative branch (the Caucus) remained in Boston, while the executive branch moved to a new Unplottable location in northern Ontario. Of course, with magical travel, the distance between them was negligible.

With such a large magical population, the wizarding society could support more than one daily newspaper. Mr. Lovegood was fascinated by all the information available. He talked about competition to Harry and Luna. Luna had trouble with the idea of newspapers competing. After all, the truth was the truth; to claim that you report the news better than another paper is to claim that they aren't telling the truth.

They visited the village of North Salem, the town that grew up around the Salem Institute in New England. They visited the campus of the famous (now co-ed) magical school. With it being summer, very few people were around.

They saw the giant crib that was used by the Muggles that raised the half- Giant Paul Bunyan. It was part of a small museum that also held his axe (bigger than Mr. Lovegood) and the rope of the Texas wizard Pecos Bill who had created a spell that let him ride a tornado. He never shared the spell, though, and no other wizard has re-created it. The other major wizard showcased in the museum was the Native wizard Gluscabi who had captured the Wind Eagle, one of the rarest magical creatures in the world.

As they left Harry remarked how he would like History of Magic better if it was as interesting as it was presented in the museum.

While they were visiting Boston, Massachusetts, (not to be confused with the Boston, Lincolnshire, where Remus Lupin lived), Harry had his "real" 13th birthday. He received whispered, "Happy birthdays" and two kisses from Luna. He had grown used to kissing her. They could be considered chaste kisses, although neither of them knew of any other way to kiss.

The final location they visited in New England was Miskatonic University. Selene wanted to visit some colleagues she had met the last time she was there. However, during a trip to the Library, Luna came into the same room as certain books, and was violently ill. The librarian said that that happened to certain sensitive people, and the best cure was to get far away. They left soon after that.

That night, Harry sat beside Luna as she dozed and was awakened by nightmares. After the second or third time, she insisted that he get in bed with her as he was dozing sitting in a chair. He didn't sleep well, but it was less because of Luna rolling on him, or pushing him in her sleep than it was Luna shifting and waking him with her movement, or holding her after a bad dream and waking later to find the circulation cut off in his arm. They made it through the night, though, and left the east coast of the New World the next day.

They wrapped up their vacation in New Goetry. The city had a larger population than all of Wizarding Britain. They took the magic trolleys around town; visited a dragon farm not far from the city; ate in numerous wizarding restaurants; watched a professional Quidditch game (they were lucky -- it's much easier to catch a Quodpot game as there are so many more of them); and generally enjoyed a completely wizarding urban lifestyle for several days.

They came home to a town without Weasleys. The family was away for a month in Egypt. Selene had to make alternative arrangements for the Fridays when they would usually go to the Weasleys. They spent one with Remus (which extended to the whole weekend). Several were spent with Sirius. They also spent one Friday with Neville at his place.

While they had fun at all three places, Harry greatly enjoyed Sirius's stories about his parents when they were in Hogwarts. He even had pictures of their wedding, and when Harry was a baby. He felt resentful, though, when Sirius reminded him that he couldn't tell anyone outside the family about his parents. Sirius, realizing Harry was upset, changed the subject and talked about becoming an Animagus. Harry appeared to get over his mood.

- - -

"How's this one?"

"Never talks, Minister. Screams sometimes when the Dementors are around or while sleeping. Otherwise, basically doesn't get out of bed."

The Minister of Magic tried to get the prisoner's attention, but wasn't able to. He looked at what he was holding, and grabbed the outer sheet of the Daily Prophet, crumpled it up into a ball, and noticed that the little observation window was too small. He unbolted the door, opened it enough to throw it at the prisoner, and still received no reaction.

"Catatonia, most likely. Hunger gets through, and the Dementors, but we don't think any outside stimulus is really getting into that head. We might as well move on."

"Very well. Couldn't have happened to a more vicious person." He closed the door, and followed the guards. It was the yearly inspection of Azkaban prison. He liked taunting the prisoners, but that last one didn't react and that took the fun out of it.

Nobody noticed that Minister Fudge forgot to slide the bolt back locking the door. Nobody except the prisoner, who felt the missing sound as more a lack of something, and spent the next hour trying to figure out what that meant. Eventually, the prisoner sat up, and picked up the crinkled newspaper. There was a picture of a family in Egypt on the front page. On the second page was an article about the winning entry of the Prophet's essay contest. Along with a picture of the winner and the winning essay was a strongly worded editorial about the poor teaching of history that the children are subjected to at Hogwarts. The prisoner looked over the paper and began to really think for the first time in years. Some time after that the prisoner got up, went to the door, and pushed it open.

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump, etc, and Headmaster of Hogwarts, was not having a good day. The many letters (and howlers) he had received from parents could probably have been ignored. But the letters from the Board of Governors could not. He sighed. There was no use in putting it off, it had to be done. He summoned the professor.

A few minutes later a ghost floated into the Headmaster's office.

"Ah, Headmaster Dribble. To what do I owe this meeting?"

Dumbledore rolled his eyes. He had been headmaster for over twenty years, and the ghost still referred to him with the name he called called the previous headmaster. And even that was wrong, as previous owner of this office was Headmaster Drippet. Yes, this little chore was overdue.

"Professor Binns, I'm afraid that I have been ordered to replace you."

"Nonsense, my boy! I'm sure there's been some misunderstanding. I've been teaching here for longer than you've been alive. Never had a complaint yet."

"Professor, you've been teaching here longer than you've been alive. And I think that's part of the problem. You haven't changed since you've been dead. The parents feel that you've been killing the love of magical history before it has a chance to grow. I will be looking for a replacement for this next term. You have the option of continuing to haunt Hogwarts, or moving on to the next great adventure."

"I've never been sacked before!"

"And they say you don't experience anything new once you're a ghost. Thank you for your service, Professor."

The ghost drifted through a wall, a shocked expression on his semi-transparent face.

Dumbledore grumbled to himself. Now he would have to get a replacement. And it was all because Neville Longbottom's family filled him with stories of his family history. It was his essay, and the accompanying editorial that had energised the parents.

Dumbledore grabbed the "Who's Who in the Wizarding World" (1959 edition) from a shelf and started paging through it.

- - -

"What happened!"

"Who's there?"

"Huh?"

"You! How did you get out there?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Peter Pettigrew."

"You were Black's friend. What are you doing here?"

"It was a terrible misunderstanding. I shouldn't be here. Let me out, please."

"Someone said you were a rat. . . ."

"Yes, I'm an Animagus."

"If you change into your animal, it doesn't hurt so bad when the Dementors come by."

"I can't change. They've warded this cell against me changing."

"That explains it."

"Don't go! You didn't open the door."

"I was supposed to open the door?"

"Yes! Of course you were supposed to open the door."

"Sorry. It's very hard to think in here. I've spent so much time hiding from the Dementors, and I can't seem to remember much. There's a boy. I've got to get the boy. . . ."

"Yes, open the door. I can help! That's it, push back the bolt. That's right. Come on."

"That way?"

"Yes. I still remember how they brought me in."

"I don't."

"Then follow me. Huh? You're an Animagus, too? Well, follow me, I'll change too. Maybe that will get us past any guards. You're rather big. I hope this works."

- - -

"It's an island. How do we get off? There's no boat. And even if we waited for it, the Aurors would stop us."

"We'll have to swim. The anti-Apparition ward can't extend too far."

"I can't swim."

"Switch to your animal form. It knows how to swim. After we've swum a ways, we can revert and try to Apparate."

"But even if I could swim, once I'm back in this form, I'd drown."

"Then you'll have to swim all the way back to the mainland. See you!"

"You dirty rat! Someday, you'll pay for that!"

The prisoner changed into an animal and jumped into the water. The rat was out of sight, hidden by the darkness and the waves. The animal did instinctively know how to swim.

- - -

"Hurry up with breakfast, kids! We have to go over to Neville's soon."

"But the party isn't for hours!"

"But we have to set up. We're bringing the Quiff set and will need to set that up. We'll have to get tables and chairs set up, and just lots of things," Larry answered.

"And don't forget to congratulate Neville on winning the essay contest."

"Yes, Aunt Selene."

"Yes, Mum."

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The Lovegoods floo-ed to the Longbottoms' manor on a beautiful August morning and worked to set up for the party. The entire class was invited (but only about half had RSVP-ed and were showing up). Hermione, Draco, and of course Neville from the next class up were also invited (as was Ron, but he couldn't make it, what with being in Egypt and all). His "not real uncles" Remus, Sirius, and Algie were there, as was Narcissa and her sister Andromeda and her family. Sirius surprised the people who knew him by showing up with a young woman who he introduced as a new Auror, Hestia Jones. Harry overheard Remus and Selene saying that that was proof that Sirius was recovering from his time in Azkaban.

They played Quiff and tag, flew on the training brooms (under supervision and restrictions on height, speed, and distance), and generally had a good time. Kreacher and Dobby (lent by Narcissa and Sirius) set up a buffet for lunch, and served the cake later. There were no gifts (that was one of the conditions for letting Harry have the party; it was more an excuse to get a lot of friends together rather than to get a lot of presents), and Harry didn't miss them. As the end time of three in the afternoon approached, several Aurors appeared. They spoke to Mrs. Longbottom. She immediately called Neville, and sent him into the house. She spoke to a gathering of adults, while Sirius and Hestia spoke with the Aurors. The parents started collecting their children, and leaving. Harry got busy with the job he had been briefed on as his duty as host: he said goodbye and thanked everyone for coming.

Soon, though, too many people were leaving at the same time, and Harry could do no more than yell "thank you, and goodbye" to some he couldn't reach.

Harry was confused. None of their other parties had ended like this one. As the last guests used the Longbottoms' fireplace to floo away, he turned to Selene.

"What happened? Why'd everyone leave so fast."

"There was an escape from Azkaban prison. Two of Voldemort's supporters got away, somehow. And they think one of them is coming here."

"Here? To Neville's? How come?"

"Her name is Bellatrix Lestrange, and she hurt Neville's parents, and the Aurors think she's after Neville."

Chapter 12

Of Mice and Madwomen

The party was Saturday, and the train to Hogwarts would leave Wednesday. Preparations for the upcoming school year kept them busy the last few days at home. They went to Diagon Alley to get their books and materials, as well as new robes since both children were growing. The mood on Diagon Alley felt tense. Everyone seemed to be looking over their shoulder, expecting something to spring up behind them.

They did notice a new book in the window of Florish and Blott's. Luna pointed it out to Harry, and they had a good laugh. It was called *Stolen Heroics: The stories of the people who actually did the deeds claimed by Gilderoy Lockhart*.

"Everyone is trying to get into the Gilderoy Lockhart club!" Luna laughed.

The night before they left for Hogwarts, Selene sat Harry and Luna down for a talk. She explained that the Tom Riddle trophy, being the least protected of the dark objects connected to Harry, had been destroyed. Luna looked at Harry carefully and confirmed it. They were still trying to get past the protections on the other two objects, and at some point would use Harry to find the last two connections. Selene tried to impress on them the danger involved in these objects. The diary and the trophy were probably the earliest horcruxes made, and that's why they were able to get past the protections to destroy them.

The other thing she wanted to say involved the escaped prisoners. They would probably try to kill Harry if they knew he was still alive, so she reminded them to be very careful about Harry's true identity. She also told them to be very careful around Neville, as everyone seemed to think he was the target of Bellatrix Lestrange. They discussed that Pettigrew probably wouldn't seek revenge; that wasn't his style. But they were still to be very careful, and get help if either of them saw anything unusual. Despite asking her repeatedly, she refused to tell them what Lestrange had done to Neville's parents. She also forbade them from asking Neville.

"It's going to be bad enough for him. If you are really his friends, then don't pressure him, don't pester him, but be there for him if he needs you. Often, the best thing you can do for a friend is to be quiet."

With that bit of advice, they went to bed.

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The wizard had drunk way too much by the time he decided to go home. He staggered out of the bar, and weaved his way down Diagon Alley. There was more of a presence of Aurors in the Alley since the escape, and the wizard smiled and waved at one of the red-robed officers. He passed a dark opening between two shops, and stopped when he heard a voice.

"Hey, buddy, can you spare a few Knuts for a wizard who's down on his luck?"

He looked into the small alley, but it was too dark. He fumbled for his wand, and got it out eventually. Holding it in front of him, he cast a Lumos. He squinted. The alley ran about four meters with a couple of doors in it. There was miscellaneous garbage on the ground, and a rat scuttled out of the light into the larger street. But he saw no sign of whoever had spoken to him. He stepped into the alley and moved his wand around to make sure that he didn't miss anything. He even looked up. There was no one there. He shrugged, and that's when he was hit from behind.

It was less than an hour later when the Aurors found him unconscious and with cracked skull. By morning the news was in the paper: escaped prisoner Peter Pettigrew was now thought to have a wand.

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On September 1st the Lovegoods floo-ed to platform Nine and Three Quarters. They got there early, having packed the previous night, and said their goodbyes on the platform. Harry and Luna entered the last car and were surprised to see someone they knew sleeping in a compartment.

"Uncle Remus! What are you doing here? You better wake up, before the train starts going, or you'll end up in Hogwarts!"

"Harry! Luna! What a surprise. I thought I'd be out of the way back here. I certainly didn't expect anyone I knew to find me."

"The back of the train is closest to the fireplaces, and we just floo-ed here," Harry pointed out.

"I should have thought of that. Anyway, are you all ready for your second year?"

They continued talking while the train filled up.

They saw the Weasleys arrive at the last minute, and Harry went to invite Ron and Ginny to their compartment. When he came back, Hermione was with them. They spent a lot of time exchanging stories about their summer. It took Hermione to ask the obvious question.

"Mr. Lupin, why are you on the Hogwarts Express?"

Harry stared at her open mouthed. "Yeah, you never told us why you're here."

Luna answered for him. "Because he's our new Defense instructor."

This time it was Remus who stared open mouthed. "How did you know?"

"Because Uncle Sirius told us last year that he wasn't returning as our instructor, and your bag says 'Prof. R. J. Lupin.'"

Their new professor smiled. "Now we know why the Hat put you in Ravenclaw. Too bad school hasn't started. I could award some house points."

"Hey!" Ron cried. "No fair! You have an uncle who can give you points."

Remus asked, "Did you notice Professor Black being unfair last year?" Ron shook his head. "Well, he's their uncle, too, and Harry's godfather. I think I can be as fair as he was."

"Sirius Black is your godfather? How come you never mentioned that?" Ron asked.

"I was rather young when it happened, and I didn't know you at the time. And I don't think I could even talk, then."

Ron rolled his eyes. "No, you prat! I mean before now."

"It's never come up. I didn't even know until after he got out of Azkaban, and by then I had a family, so he's just a friend. I suppose if something were to happen to the Lovegoods it might be important, but as Uncle Remus said. . . ."

"Sorry, Harry. Once we're off the train, it has to be Professor Lupin," Remus interrupted.

"Oh, right. Just like it was Professor Black all last year. Anyway, as Professor Lupin said, to be fair, we thought it best to not mention it to anyone."

Shortly after, Draco and Neville came in, and the discussion returned to the events of the summer. Ron asked about the escaped prisoner, and Draco closed his eyes and took a big, melodramatic, breath.

"Oh, please! Not you, too! Everyone has been asking me, 'Have you seen your escaped aunt yet?' Doesn't anyone have brains? If we had and didn't report her to the Aurors, do you think I'd just blab it? And as you haven't seen anything in the paper about it, then we haven't reported it, so there's no way to know if we haven't seen her, or if we have and are just keeping it quiet."

Luna didn't even look up from her copy of the Quibbler as she said, "In other words, he hasn't seen her, and he's tired of giving the same answer."

As Draco smiled and nodded, the train began to slow until it came to a complete stop. Inexplicably, the lights went out.

"What's happening?" "We're not at the station." "Why did the lights go out?" was heard up and down the train. The air in their compartment grew cold, and the door opened to a large, shrouded creature. Somebody gave a little scream, someone else fell down, but Remus stood and pointed his wand at the creature.

"Neither Pettigrew nor Lestrange are here. Begone!" The creature drifted down the train.

"I'll be right back. Help whoever fell." Remus left the compartment. Soon the lights came back on, and the train started moving again. The children found that Harry had fallen down and looked frightened. Draco sat on the bench looking paler than usual, his gaze unfocused and shivering. Neville also sat on the bench, curled into a ball, with his arms wrapped tightly around his legs. He flinched when Ginny touched his arm as she asked if he was alright. Harry shook his head as they helped him off the floor.

"Who screamed?" he asked.

"I think I yelped," Neville confessed, shuddering. "I think I remembered. . . ." his voice faded off, and he didn't look at anyone.

"No, it was a woman. And there was someone laughing at her. I don't know. . . ." he shuddered again.

Luna whispered to Harry, as if she was afraid what she was saying would make it real, "I remembered when Mum almost died. I saw her lying on the ground, not breathing. . . ." Harry wrapped his arms around her and gently rubbed her back.

"I felt like I'd never be happy again," Ron said. Ginny and Neville nodded. While they were talking, Draco started following the conversation with his eyes, but made no other movement. Harry noticed and went over to him.

"You alright Draco?" The blond just nodded.

Remus came back and handed out chunks of chocolate to everyone. He explained that they had just encountered Dementors, the Azkaban guards. The chocolate seemed to help relax Draco, but he still looked haunted. Remus left the compartment to check on the rest of the students. The children talked quietly among themselves about what happened and how they felt -- all except Draco. He just sat quietly, occasionally closing his eyes and taking deep shaky breaths.

Remus returned as the sun was setting and they were still a ways from Hogwarts. Remus suggested that Draco go to the Hospital Wing once they arrived, but he insisted that he was fine. Remus accepted his assurance skeptically, got down his trunk, and said he'd see them at Hogwarts.

"What? You're moving to a different compartment? You don't have to do that!" Harry insisted.

"Oh, no. I need to go on to Hogwarts now. I will see you lot in class." He then Disapparated with a little pop. They figured he was going to report on the Dementors.

They arrived shortly in Hogsmeade, and disembarked the train. As they were getting into the magic carriage that would take them from the train station to the castle, Luna broke away from them, and did something near the hitches.

When she got into the carriage she said, "I think it's the same one that took us to the station at the end of last year."

"Same one what that took us to the station?" Harry asked.

"Winged horse-thingie." The discussion continued, and Harry wasn't sure if this was one of the dubious creatures that Luna read about in the Quibbler, or if it was really there. He was inclined to believe her, since she didn't give the name of the beast. Draco came out of his shell enough to ask why she was the only one to see it. The guess that only girls could see them couldn't be disproved, because there was only the three of them in the carriage. Harry asked Luna if she could help him try to feel it when they got out. Harry and Draco could

feel the creature. It was weird, feeling something, but seeing the full moon rise right through it. They found that other girls couldn't see it, so they were still not sure why Luna could. The only other person they talked to who could see it was Neville. Harry and Luna escorted Draco to the feast to make sure he was fine.

The feast was similar to their first feast, but since they weren't being sorted, they spent the time waiting for the sorting walking around and visiting friends. The sorting was similar to the previous year, and each table cheered as they got a new group of first years students. Professor Dumbledore said some silly words that signalled the food to appear. After eating, he got up and welcomed everyone. He also introduced Remus as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor even though Remus was absent from the feast. There were two other new faces at the teachers table, though, and Dumbledore introduced one of them as Wilhemina Grubbly-Plank, the new Care of Magical Creatures instructor. She was an elderly witch with closely cropped, gray hair and a prominent chin. She rose from her chair and nodded to the children. The other unknown figure at the head table was a man who had been talking with Professor Snape. He had brown hair streaked with gray, a very wrinkled face that looked like it spent a lot of time outside, and a somewhat disdainful expression on it, but that could be explained by the fact that he was talking to Snape.

"And allow me to introduce Sir Giles Tumulty, our new History of Magic professor." Sir Giles turned to the students, giving them an appraising look, and nodded. The announcement got a big applause from the Ravenclaws. They may have been the best at staying awake in Binns class, but that didn't mean they liked it.

"And finally, this year we have some of the guards from Azkaban outside the gates. They will be protecting Hogwarts from the escaped prisoners. Stay out of their way, and stay out of the forbidden forest." He seemed to look at the Gryffindor table. "The Dementors are extremely dangerous, and should they make a mistake you for those they seek, it would mean your soul and your life." People were glancing at each other as he said this.

As they were filing out, Harry mentioned to Luna, "I think I'll try out for Quidditch this year. Dumbledore said two weeks, right?"

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Minerva McGonagall, having executed her duty to get the first years sorted, sat down beside the Headmaster. She looked over the tables carefully starting with her own. Ron Weasley she rejected out of hand. The seven children of Arthur and Molly were too well known for it to be him. Seamus Finnigan? No, she knew Mary and remembered hearing when he was born. Dean Thomas? Skin color could be changed. And it would be easy for him to hide there in an all-Muggle environment. But magical exhaustion when he was 9 and in St. Mungo's -- that didn't fit. Thomas' family wouldn't know about magic until he got his letter. She rejected him.

Hufflepuff? Not Longbottom or Macmillan -- too pure blood, and known to be in those homes before the mysterious disappearance of Potter. Not Finch-Fletchley for the same reasons as Thomas -- just too Muggle to fit the clues.

Ravenclaw? She knew the least about those students. Corner, Boot, Goldstien - the Ravenclaw golden boys? Only Corner had dark hair, but there was a little red in Boot's -- influence of Lily, maybe? Entwistle? He's a half blood, and while smart, didn't seem particularly magically powerful. Cornfoot? A little pudgy; didn't look like James or Lily. Blond hair might not be the original color, either. Hmmm. Potter had saved his guardian and magically exhausted himself? She looked at Corner again. Maybe.

Slytherin? She shuddered. Not Malfoy, or Nott -- their births had big announcements she remembered; pure blood nonsense. Goyle or Crabbe? She shuddered again. To mangle a phrase, they didn't have two brain cells to rub together. Zabini? Quiet, good wizard. Again, changing skin color wouldn't have been difficult. His famous mother, though -- if she had "acquired" a child about six years ago, there would have been mention of it in one of the rags, the Quibbler or Witch Weekly, at least. But she didn't remember anything like that.

She had one more thought. What if he was disguised, either magically or otherwise, as a girl? She didn't even want to contemplate that. She hoped the enchantment on the girl's stairs

would protect against that, but with magic, you never knew. She shook her head and headed towards her rooms near the Gryffindor Tower. She would have to watch that Michael Corner.

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Up in the Ravenclaw tower, they were having their usual "These are the rules according to Ravenclaw" meeting. After they got their traditional introduction, Harry got up.

"Hi! I'm Harry Lovegood, I'm a second year. Last year I tried an experiment where the Muggle-raised got together and practiced wand movements that the magically-raised had already seen or tried. It worked really well, and from the sound of it, the whole class got off to a better start than previous years. This isn't limited to Ravenclaws, nor is it limited to Muggle born, either. We'll meet in the Great Hall after dinner on Friday. Hopefully, I have friends also making this announcement in the other common rooms."

Tom Towey, one of Harry's roommates, spoke up, "Hey, Harry. What about our study group?"

"I figured we'd start up over the weekend, or on Monday. By that time, the first years should be up to teaching each other. That's something else we did -- after we learned the wand movements, it just sort of became an inter-house study group. We have members from all four houses, and it's a pretty good way to make friends outside your house, and make good grades, too."

There were a few questions about the group, and then the first years were sent to bed.

Penelope Clearwater, seventh year Prefect, took over the meeting.

"Alright! What do we know about the new instructors?"

Harry raised his hand. "Remus Lupin is a good guy. I've visited him."

"Yes, yes, but what about his credentials?"

Roger Davies, a fourth year, spoke up. "He's done a few articles on dark creatures in Transfigurations Today. They were pretty good. One on Vampires, and one on Werewolves."

"Anyone one else? Grubby-Plank substituted several times last year. Kettleburn did not have a good year last year. No surprise he quit. Alright, what about Sir Giles Tumulty?"

Hermione raised her hand, "I read his book Historical Vestiges of Sacred Vessels in Folklore. Published in the '30's, if I recall correctly. From what I remember it was well-researched, but rather dry."

"Anyone else?"

Bob Min, the seventh year prefect, spoke up. "I've got something upstairs." He raced up the boy's stairs and was soon coming down with a book.

"1986's The Raider's Journal, an Autobiography of Dr. Henry Jones, Jr., Archaeologist, (The Non-Libelous Parts.) He's mentioned as being good, but not publishing much." He was quickly flipping through the book. "They encountered each other while searching for the Spear of Longius. Jones figured that Tumulty would have gotten there first if he didn't have such an abrasive personality that sources wouldn't talk to him."

"Was Jones a wizard?" someone asked.

"No. Seems to have encountered some magical items, though, and avoided the Obliviators."

No one had much more to add, so they called it a night.

They received their class schedules the next morning.

"Who makes up these schedules?" Harry groaned. "Nothing like starting the term with our worst day. Well, off to Herbology!" They had double Herbology with the Hufflepuffs. That was followed by Transfigurations, lunch, then Remus -- Professor Lupin's -- class, Defense Against the Dark Arts. However, once they got there, they

found a note that class was cancelled that day. That did give them a period off before they had to go to Double Potions with the Slytherins. Harry smiled and said hello to Mike Daly and got to work avoiding getting into trouble with Professor Snape. They usually didn't have any trouble, and that held true for this class, too. The Ravenclaws knew that the best way to get along in Snape's class was to read ahead and know the material. Careful following of the potion directions also helped. Plus, Snape still seemed to be on his best behavior as he was last year.

And then they were done.

Remus appeared in the Great Hall the next day for Friday dinner. He stayed around and helped the second years teach the Muggle-raised first years the basic wand motions. He was impressed with Harry's teaching style and the fact that a Slytherin was helping him. They sat around with the first years after the formal lesson and discussed wizarding culture. As they were leaving, Remus asked if he could sit in on some of their study groups. They had no problem with that, but warned him that he had to pull his weight like everyone else. He laughed, and they said goodnight.

They didn't have Sir Giles' class until Monday afternoon. They shuffled into class full of anticipation. Professor Tumulty swept in like a whirlwind.

"I've reviewed the sorry excuse for history that you've been fed. In this class we are going to think, if it's not beyond your capacity. Goblin wars are all fine; they make for excellent reading, what with all that blood and destruction. Lots of fun. But what did we learn from it? Take the Goblin Rebellion of 1682. Anyone remember that one? What were the chief lessons from it?"

Some of Harry's house mates put up their hands. Tumulty picked Larry Pohlen.

"Davdar the Bloody began it after the tariff of 1680 started being enforced."

Tumulty replied with a sneer, "That's what happened, and you contradicted yourself. If he started it after the tariff was passed, then you could say the tariff started it. But that's not what I asked. One point from Ravenclaw. What did we learn from the Goblin Rebellion?"

Luna was the only hand that went up after his reply to Larry. Tumulty nodded at her.

"The lesson that should have been learned was don't interfere with the goblins' commerce. But I don't think that lesson was learned, as there have been numerous rebellions since with different specific causes, but the same basic one."

"Exactly, Miss. . . ." He checked his class list, "Miss Lovegood. If you don't learn from it, what's the point?"

Everyone thought it was a much better lesson than any that Binns had taught. The cutting replies if you answered wrong weren't fun, but they had to admit they were seeing history in a new light. Of course, getting a new teacher rendered Ed Benvenuto's history notes obsolete. Ed had been a Ravenclaw in the 1950s, and everyone agreed that his notes on Binns' classes were the best anyone had ever produced. They were copied and had been used by forty years of Ravenclaws. Now it was every man and woman for themselves.

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They didn't have Professor Lupin's class until Tuesday. The introductory class was mostly review.

He finished up with, "I see that you actually learned from Professor Black. It's a shame he couldn't return this year. I'll try to teach as well as he did, and I ask you to try to learn from me as well as you did from him. This year we'll concentrate on more defensive spells, and even try a little dueling." There was a mummer of excitement about that. "I must warn you that it would be the very rudiments of dueling. No one will get out of this class and be ready for the international circuit. However, even a champion like Professor Flitwick had to start somewhere.

"Oh, yes. There will be, from time to time, classes when I introduce you to various dark creatures. That's mostly what you study in 3rd year, but since I'll have the creatures here, there's no reason not to give you an introduction and a break from the routine."

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"Professor Lupin?"

"Hello, Harry. I mean, Mr. Lovegood. And I'm sorry, I know we met this summer at the Longbottom's and you're in my second year Ravenclaw class, but I cannot remember your name. It might be because I have over 150 new students whose names I have to learn."

"Elisabeth Ericson, sir."

"Ah, yes, Miss Ericson. What may I do for you?"

"Last year Sirius, Professor Black, that is, was instructing us on how to become Animagi. . . ."

"Good Lord, that wasn't on the curriculum, was it?"

"No, sir. Luna detected that we could do it, and Harry got Professor Black to teach us."

"Hmmm, yes, and who knows he was teaching you?"

"Just Luna and Professor Black," Harry answered.

"Well, good, because what he was teaching you was very dangerous magic, and shouldn't be attempted by unsupervised students."

Harry grinned, "Like the Marauders did?"

"Exactly unlike the Marauders. It was very dangerous, and could have led to serious consequences. It's much better to do it this way with supervision."

Harry and Liz grinned at each other, and answered, "Yes, sir."

"Now, why don't you fill me in on what you've been doing about it?"

"Sirius gave us the formula for the potion that allows us to find our animal. We've been brewing it up in the Ravenclaw potion lab."

"The Ravenclaws have their own potion lab? Gryffindor never had anything like that!"

"Then how did you do any practical potion homework?"

"I don't remember getting any. Have you?"

"No, but the upper levels are always brewing things. We just assumed it was homework."

"Maybe Professor Snape is different from old Slughorn. But no matter, you have the potion done?"

Liz answered, "Yes, sir." Harry nodded.

Lupin quizzed them a little on the potion and its preparation. He examined the vials, and determined, to the best of his ability, that they were the correct potion correctly made.

Very well, if you are sure. . . ." He waved his wand, and an area in the front of the classroom was covered with cushions. "Sit down. It's best to do it on the floor, as you are likely to fall over."

The two second years sat on the cushions. They opened their own bottles, and drank.

Lupin watched as they closed their eyes. They started to wobble, and first one, then the other fell over.

They lay there a few minutes, sometimes rolling their heads around. Finally, they straightened out their bodies and opened their eyes only to close them immediately.

"Why is the room spinning?" Harry asked.

Liz didn't answer his question. "A mouse? I can turn into a mouse? Is this all worth it for a mouse? What if I don't want to be a mouse? What if I want to be a lion or eagle? Do I have to be a mouse?"

Lupin answered, "Unfortunately, yes. You only get one Animagus form, and it isn't selectable by you. There is a lot of work ahead of you, still, so you might want to try to figure out if you want to put all that work into becoming a mouse."

They opened their eyes again, and the spinning must have stopped. However, their attempts to sit up failed dismally.

"Better give it some more time. How about you, Harry? What is your animal?"

"I don't believe it!"

"What? Worse than a mouse?"

"I don't know about worse, but it's strange."

"What is it?" Remus had a flashback to their fifth year when his friends had told him they became Animagi to keep Remus company during the full moon. They had drawn out telling him what their forms were, too.

"I'm a rhinoceros!"

"You're kidding!" Liz exclaimed.

"Unbelievable," Remus muttered.

"My thoughts exactly. Does anyone have any idea how these things happen?" Harry complained.

"No one knows. You, too, will have to decide if it is worth the effort, and I emphasize effort. It will still probably take you years. You will have to learn to transform each part of your body and then try to put it

all together. Let me tell you, the tail hung up the Marauders for almost a year. It's one thing to change your hand into a paw; it's another to create a body part that didn't exist. I'm not sure I even want to think about your horn, Harry."

They were able to sit up and soon were on their feet.

"Let me know if you want to continue."

As the two students left Lupin heard Miss Ericson again say, "I'm just not sure if it's worth it for a mouse!"

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The second Saturday of the school year dawned cool and slightly overcast, yet there was an excitement in the Great Hall that morning at breakfast. Each house had the Quidditch pitch for two hours that day and the next for Quidditch tryouts. Ravenclaw had their tryouts starting at 10 AM. There were a lot of hopeful students anxiously waiting their turn including Harry. He wasn't sure what position he would play, but he knew he loved flying. The Slytherins had their tryout right before.

Once on the pitch, Harry waved at Draco. The Slytherin third year flew over.

"Hi, Harry."

"Hi, Draco. Make the team?"

"Yes! You are looking at the new Seeker!" He looked around and lowered his voice. "You'll never guess what my father tried to do. He was going to buy the whole team new racing brooms if they would put me on the team."

Harry had some trouble believing it.

"I was able to talk him out of it," he smiled, "and got this great racing broom out of the deal."

"How'd you do that?"

"Partially appealed to his pride -- if he bought the whole team brooms everyone would say that I bought my way on to the team, with the implication being that I wasn't good enough to make it any other way. He accused me of being Gryffindorish in my attitude that a proper Slytherin would do whatever it took to win, or, in this case, get on the team. I told him that a Slytherin picks his battles, and Quidditch wasn't important enough to accept the sort of rumors that it would generate. We kept going around about winning verses losing the respect of people I'll have to interact with the rest of my life. I think it was the phrase loss of respect that finally convinced him. He walked off saying something about in his day. . . ."

They both laughed at that.

"So, going to try out for the Ravenclaw team?"

"Yes."

"Got a good broom?"

"No, I'll have to use one of the house brooms."

"Borrow mine. It's a Nimbus 2001 - fastest broom on the market!"

"Wow! That's great, but I'd be afraid of breaking it. I know brooms are really expensive."

"I insist. It will give me an excuse to stay around and scout out your team."

"All right. I'll be careful."

Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain, had everyone organized quickly into positions they wanted to try for. Harry was one of the "anywhere" hopefuls. He tried for Beater first. It was the least glamorous, but probably the most difficult position. They had to protect the Seeker and the Chasers while trying to disrupt the other team with the Bludger. While Harry had the eye to hit the Bludger, he

didn't have the skill to get it to go where he wanted it. Nor did he have the knowledge of the game to know where to be to protect the chasers, or get the Bludger to a position where it would help them in the future. Besides, he just wasn't that strong.

The Chaser position was more glamorous. He did reasonably well with maneuvering with the Quaffle on Draco's Nimbus 2001, and he was fair at throwing it to his teammates, but he was rotten at catching it. Or, more accurately, being in the position where the Quaffle was thrown for him to catch. He just didn't have the experience with inverted Vs, double-back tosses, Narley's pitch, and other formations.

He didn't try out for keeper. He wanted to fly, not hover.

When the Seekers turn came, he joined the other three hopefuls and Cho Chang the current seeker. Roger had released the Golden Snitch while the tryouts for Keeper had been going on. Now the five of them had to find the Snitch. They all flew to the Seeker's usual area above the height of the goals. Most Seekers kept to that area, watching down at the game and looking for the Snitch. Harry joined the group up there, but decided that if everyone was up there they would all see the Snitch at the about the same time, and be about the same distance from it. So he sped up his broom and started searching from a lower altitude, also getting the chance to really see what Draco's broom was capable of. At first the other Seekers thought he had seen the Snitch, but when he changed directions just to feel how the broom handled, they returned to the higher elevation to search. Suddenly he banked, dove, changed directions, used the extra speed of the dive to give the broom a quicker altitude gain, and had the Snitch before any of the others had even seen it. His maneuver had unintentionally thrown everyone's attention off the actual location of the Snitch. Harry landed with the Snitch, yelling praises about the broom to Draco.

Roger came over to him. Harry noticed Cho standing near where Roger was, smirking.

"Good job, Lovegood. But is that your broom?"

"No, Draco lent it to me."

"Do you have your own broom?"

"If I get on the team, I'll get one. But I'll probably have to use one of the school brooms at first."

Roger took the Snitch and released it.

"Why don't you get one of the school brooms now, and see how well you do."

Harry shrugged and returned Draco's broom. He was back from the broom locker a few minutes later.

The five potential seekers took off, and again Harry stayed away from the crowd. He still flew to take the measure of the broom he was on but was disappointed by its sluggishness. Someone above yelled, and the pack was off. Harry pulled the broom around towards the area where everyone else was aiming. He was closer, but the broom lost power while in the sharp turn, and Harry wasn't able to get it up to speed to beat the other seekers. Cho ended up getting it.

"Good job, everyone. Thanks for coming. Cho, you keep the position. Harry, I liked your moves. Get yourself a good broom, and you're the reserve Seeker. You'll be practicing with the rest of the team, and be ready to go at the games."

As Harry walked away, he ignored the smug look on Cho's face. It was only a game!

- - -

"Larry, Harry and Luna wrote a letter."

"What's it say, dear?"

"Hmmm, they must not be teaching them enough. They're getting into other things to keep themselves busy."

"Really? What did they do this time?"

"Harry got himself into something called, uh, oh, here it is. Quidditch."

"WHAT! Harry got on the team! That's great!"

"He's the reserve Seeker. But it says he needs a broom. Oh, well."
She sighed, "He was only the reserve, anyway."

"This could be said to fall under education expenses. Harry could, essentially, buy his own broom."

"I don't know, Larry. That money was set aside for Harry's schooling and upkeep."

"You know as well as I do that James Potter was a Quidditch fanatic. He'd buy his son a broom in a moment."

"That's true, but he had the whole Potter Trust. Harry doesn't get it until he's seventeen. But we'll get him a broom. I just don't think we should get him the latest, greatest model. Can you check around for the best deal?"

"Of course. I have contacts through the Quibbler that might come in handy."

"Thank you, Larry. I know how much Quidditch means to most of the kids at school."

"Now, what has our daughter gotten herself into?"

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Magic, called the teacher's meeting to order.

"Headmaster, they're doing it again this year!" the Potions instructor complained.

"Doing what, Severus?" Dumbledore said quietly. He loved doing that, knowing it would just rile up his irritable friend more.

"They're cheating!" That got some reaction from the other teachers.

"That's a serious charge Severus. Care to fill us in on whom?" Minerva McGonagall asked.

"The second and third year classes, and now they've got the first years doing it, and some of the fourth years are doing it, too. They meet every evening after dinner in the Great Hall and cheat!"

The diminutive Charms professor spoke up, "Really, Severus, they aren't cheating. They're just studying together. It's no worse than what they do in the common rooms."

"But now they have the whole class to cheat off of. In the past I could count on Hufflepuffs coming up with an answer, and the Gryffindors finding someone to give them an answer. . . ."

"I say!" McGonagall tried to interrupt, but Snape just kept going.

"The Ravenclaws were the only ones who would come up with all their own work, because they were so egotistical they wouldn't accept an answer from someone else and so fixated on trying to have the highest score that the only answer they would share was a wrong one."

He also ignored Flitwick's protest at his stereotyping of the Ravenclaws.

"Even my Slytherins are joining in! They say it's the Slytherin thing to do so as to get the best grade! Albus, I demand you put a stop to it!"

McGonagall gave Snape a withering look which he ignored, then turned towards the Headmaster. "Albus, all they are doing is studying together. Not only are the students doing better than any classes I've seen in a long time, but the inter-house rivalry that results in so many accidents during the year is virtually non-existent in the first three years. And it seems to be spreading."

"But they're cheating!"

Flitwick got his chance to glower at Snape, which was as effective as McGonagall's look. "As was already said, they are studying together, and seem to be doing a good job of it. But the simple solution to your concerns is to reduce the effect of homework on their grade, and have more quizzes. If they are really learning the homework, then they will do well in the test. It's what I do, and it does show that most of the students are really learning."

Pomona Sprout, head of Hufflepuff house, flashed Snape a dirty look. Even though he didn't really insult her students, his general feelings for Hufflepuffs were well known. She said, "And if you've observed these study sessions like I have, you would know that they try to explain things to each other, not just copy from each other. They're very organized, try to keep to the topic, but don't forget to have fun, too. I really don't see any downside to this."

"I don't see why we don't encourage this," Remus Lupin said, which brought a surprised gape from Snape, and gave Remus an opportunity to glare at the head of Slytherin house.

"I agree," said Professor Vector, the Arithmancy instructor, regarding Snape disparagingly. "We could even stop by and answer any questions they might have."

"What! As if teaching them all day wasn't enough!" Snape protested.

"It's not as if it's going to help in the long run," Sir Giles said, giving Snape an angry look (but to be fair, he did that to everyone). "Most will grow up to be sheep, going to their little jobs and never give most of what they learn another thought. If it helps them even a little, let them do it. It wouldn't take much time to show up at their evening sessions every now and then, either."

Professor Grubby-Plank frowned at Snape, then said, "And I must say, that the third year double classes are noticeably lacking the tension of the other years where houses share the same class."

"I must say that I foresaw this, which is why I accepted the Headmaster's invitation to this meeting," the Divination professor

Sibyll Trelawney declared. Snape and McGonagall made snorting noises. Trelawney gave the evil eye to Snape before continuing. "If I may be of any assistance, I will gladly give up some of my evening mediation time."

Dr. Ransom, Professor of Ancient Runes, said, "If we do attend their study groups, we have to be available to answer questions on any subject. As far as encouraging these study groups, this might even give the upper levels reason to study together. If there's a teacher available to answer any questions, then it would be incentive for them to study together, too." He favored Snape with a contemptuous look, because he didn't want to be left out, and continued, "However, if they already have four groups meeting in the Great Hall, adding three more years might make it too noisy. Is there anyplace else they can meet? Maybe create a common room for each year?"

Victor Cameron, the Muggle Studies instructor, added, "If we are going to have a faculty assistant for the study groups, the study rooms would have to be close together so as to make the teacher available to them all." Snape started sputtering at this, which earned him a dismissive look and rolled eyes from Cameron.

Dumbledore decided to bring the meeting to a close. "That will probably be required if the other years want to study together. I shall look into it. Which students are in charge of these study groups?"

McGonagall answered, "Third year has Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger. Second year has Mike Daly and Harry Lovegood. I don't know about first or fourth years."

"No matter, I shall find out. Before setting anything up, I shall talk to the students who are in charge and find out what they want and need. Meanwhile, if you so desire, you may attend the study halls in the Great Hall. This meeting is adjourned."

As they were walking out, McGonagall addressed Flitwick quietly.

"Filius, have you noticed anything unusual about Michael Corner?"

"Unusual? In what way?"

"Oh, anything, really. I was thinking about a certain missing student that Albus has been obsessing over, and thought that if he was hiding in plain sight, he'd be in our third year. I've eliminated most of the students, and he's one I haven't."

"Ah, you mean Potter. He doesn't look like James or Lily."

"I wouldn't expect him to. Just trying to figure out how to tell if he is."

"I'm not sure. If he doesn't look or sound like James, without digging into their family life, we'd never know."

"I think I agree. But if they are trying to hide him, then the family won't be very forthcoming. And if there are still people after him, then it wouldn't do to draw attention to anyone with our suspicions."

Flitwick nodded and said, "Agreed. We should just watch and wait."

They separated. Flitwick went off thinking, "Michael Corner, hmmm. Maybe I'll invite the Ravenclaw golden trio to tea some time."

- - -

Roger Davies gave Harry pointers on being a Seeker and got him the Library's copy of Quidditch Through the Ages as an introduction to the game. Cho would hardly speak to him. Harry, coached by Luna, didn't let Cho's snide remarks and gloating when she caught the Snitch in practice get to him.

But Harry was happy! He got to fly, and did things that weren't allowed in the flying classes they had had first year. He loved the speed and the sudden changes of direction.

Roger's comment on his flying was: "You're crazy, Lovegood!"

Almost three weeks after making the team Harry and Luna were at breakfast. A large owl swooped into the Great Hall and dropped a long package right on Harry's eggs. It didn't wait for any food but just flew away.

The broom shape had Harry excited, but Luna insisted he read the note first. By this time the rest of the team was gathered around.

Dear Harry,

It's nice to have friends in low places. My expert on the Chudley Cannons Jinx, their locker room maintenance man, told me that the Cannons Chaser was going to replace his broom with one of the new Nimbus ones. Which meant that some of his old brooms might be available. This may not be top of the line, but it has got to be better than school brooms.

Use it in good health. Don't let Quidditch interfere with your schoolwork.

And tell Luna to have fun with her friends.

Uncle Larry

"Well, go ahead and open it!" Jack Bradley, one of the Chasers said.

Harry, with a bit of help from his team, soon had the broom unwrapped.

"A Fireball XL 5!" exclaimed Eddie Carmichael, the only seventh year on the team. "But it's still a lot slower than the Nimbus 2001 that the Slytherin's Seeker has."

"Well, the broom can help, but it's the flyer that really makes the difference." Harry rejoined. Cho snorted in a very un-ladylike way, and stomped off. She had a Cleansweep 6, the current top of that line, which was also slower than the Nimbus 2000, let alone the 2001.

"Want to try it out this evening, Luna?" Harry asked.

"I'm busy tonight. How about after lunch before History?"

"Can't. I have to finish the History essay at that time, and tomorrow's Thursday, our busiest day."

"Then tomorrow evening?"

"Quidditch. How about a short lunch and do it then?"

"Sure. But now we need to finish that Potions Essay. Really, I don't know why they don't use Puffskein hair instead of Doxy wings."

"Because Puffskein hair has no magical properties?"

"That's just what they want you to think!"

The two walked off to the tower to put away the broom, and get their books, discussing what they wanted, and why.

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It was Halloween and the castle was relatively empty. Most of the students (third year and above) were at the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year. Harry and Luna were having a late breakfast as it was Sunday and they had no classes that day. The Great Hall was almost completely empty. Sitting alone at the Gryffindor table was Neville Longbottom. They headed over to him.

"Hey Neville!" Harry said, brightly.

"Hello, Neville."

"Hi, Harry, Luna."

Luna looked at him with her wide, silvery eyes and asked, "Why so glum?"

"My Gran didn't give me permission to go to Hogsmeade. She thought it was too dangerous."

"She's always been protective of you, hasn't she?" Harry asked.

Neville grunted.

Luna said, "We're stuck here too, so why don't you spend the day with us?"

Neville made a non-committal sound. Harry and Luna ate breakfast, and made small talk. As they were finishing up, Neville seemed to come to a decision.

He asked, "Do you think Lestrangle will really come to Hogwarts?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't see why she would. She's escaped Azkaban, so she's obviously smart. If she's smart, she'd avoid the Dementors around here. It's not as if they're a secret or anything. After meeting them on the train, I want to be as far away from them as possible."

Neville nodded. "What was it like for you?"

Luna closed her eyes and said, "I remembered when my Mum almost died. I heard the thunder and smelled the burnt flesh and saw her with that terrible burn and she was so still she wasn't even breathing." She shook her self. "That's probably my worst memory."

Neville looked at Harry, and after a moment Luna did, too. Harry didn't look at either of them as he said, "I heard someone screaming. It may have been my mum. Then there was someone laughing. I think it was her murderer. I was only one at the time, so I'm not sure."

Luna put her arm around Harry and gave him a half hug. He smiled at her, and then looked at Neville.

Neville looked at his shoes, took a deep breath, "I heard screaming too. Mine and my parents. They were tortured into insanity by Lestrangle. Gran thinks Lestrangle is insane, too. You would almost have to be after so many years in Azkaban. But the other thing is, they found a page from the Daily Prophet in her cell. It had my picture on it, from when I won the Prophet's essay contest. They think that was the driving force for her to escape. They think she's coming after me."

"That's rather flimsy evidence," Harry said. "How did she get the paper? Do Azkaban prisoners routinely get the Daily Prophet? If so, then maybe. If not, then someone had to have either given her that paper, or left it when they let her out."

"Let her out? What makes you say someone let her out?"

"There's been nothing in the paper about how she got out, so either she's been able to get out the entire time, or someone let her out. If she could get out at any time, why didn't she? The paper said that she was catatonic from the Dementors, so we can assume she didn't like them either, and would want to leave. So if she wanted to, and could, she would have left. Therefore, I think that someone helped her escape. But I can't see why your picture would cause her to want to escape."

"If she blamed me for being captured then it might. After all, she was captured in our house."

Harry persisted, "I don't know, Neville. It still doesn't make sense that she'd break out to come after you."

"She did," Luna said, in a slow, breathy voice. Harry looked at her, but she didn't seem to be looking at anything in particular, just staring off into space. She seemed to regain focus, and turned to Neville. "When she comes, we'll stand with you, Neville. You won't be alone."

"How do you know?" Harry asked.

"I just know," she said in an offhand way. "Want to come to the library to study with us? I know you're not in our classes, but I'm sure there's studying you could be doing, too. I can't think that the teachers would stop assigning essays just because you're in third year."

"No, they still give homework."

"I suppose if they were all attacked by Wrackspurts at the same time, but what are the chances of that happening?"

"Pretty small," Harry answered, as Neville looked between the two as if they just lost their minds.

"Wrackspurts?" he asked.

Harry just shrugged, and Luna began describing the invisible creatures that cause people to forget things if they get in their ears.

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It was a fairly normal looking kitchen, which made it a fairly un-normal kitchen for a witch. The owner of the kitchen put the coffee in the percolator and plugged it in. She turned on the gas stove and fried a couple of eggs, made toast in a toaster, and had it all on a plate when her husband came down the stairs already dressed for work. He normally didn't go to work on Sunday, but there was a project he just had to finish before tomorrow and with the Halloween party tonight, well, not being around to help with the set up would be unthinkable. He was married to a witch, after all. He quickly ate, kissed his wife goodbye, and Apparated away. She cleaned up, poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table with Sunday Times. She never heard a thing before the incantation: "Incarcerous."

She was wrapped in ropes before she knew what was happening. A hand removed her wand from her housecoat pocket. She was completely at the mercy of her captor, which terrified her. A silencing spell later, and she couldn't even scream. She couldn't hear anything either, and sat for long minutes wondering what was going on, as her captor didn't appear.

Finally the silence spell was removed from her. A figure moved around the table, and she saw Bellatrix Lestrange, her hair hanging down wet.

"Is that my dress you're wearing?" She asked.

The gaunt, raven haired woman looked down, and said, "Yes. I had to adjust it a bit. I've seem to have lost a bit of weight. I think it looks good on me."

"You were always borrowing my clothes without asking."

"You were always so easy to rile up, Andy."

Andromeda Tonks looked at her sister. The years in Azkaban hadn't been kind to her. Her eyes looked shrunken, and they darted around, not looking at her. She would tremble every now and then.

"What are you doing here, Trixie?"

"Do I need a reason to visit my little sister?"

"Considering that all the Aurors in the country are searching for you, as well as the Muggle police, then yes, I would think you would need a reason to visit me."

"Well, it's just a social call. Sorry about the ropes, though. I can't be too careful."

"I guess I can understand, as long as you don't hurt me."

"No, I won't hurt you. There's only one person I hurt now-a-days. But I won't go back. You can't make me."

"Considering you have me tied up, no, I can't make you. Why did you escape?"

"You need to ask why? Then you obviously have never been around them before! I'm sure after being around just one of them you'd try to escape, too." She closed her eyes, and the tremors ran through her whole body for several minutes. She sucked in her breath as if in pain and her eyes opened. She looked around, as if expecting someone or something to be there.

"No, there's only one person to hurt now," she murmured. She focused on her sister, "Where's Nymphie?"

Andromida felt a chill of fear run through her. "She's not here Trixie. She doesn't live here any more. She's in Auror training."

Bellatrix looked surprised. "Impossible. She was knee high to a kneazle! She wasn't even in Hogwarts."

"You've been away for a long time, Trixie. And even before you went, you never visited."

"No, Father said we weren't to see you again. You left! You left the family!"

"I fell in love, Trixie."

"You disobeyed Father. You were supposed to marry Nott! I married Rodolphus even though I wanted to marry Potter. But I obeyed!"

"I love Ted. Did you love Rodolphus?"

"No. He was an animal. He hurt me! Why did Father do that to me?" She seemed to revert to the whiney child she had been.

"He didn't care about us, Trixie. He never cared about us."

"He hurt me too. But no more!"

"No, he won't hurt us any more. He's dead now, Trixie. He's gone forever."

"Good. No more hurting. Only one. . . ." She seemed to drift off, and shuddered again. She snapped out of it.

"Help me, Andy."

"How can I help you, Trixie?"

"There's so much I don't remember. All the good things are gone. But there's something I remember. There was a boy. I remember the boy. It was his name in the newspaper. Neville Longbottom. Do you know where he is?"

"Trixie! Stay away from Longbottom. They know you're after him. He's protected."

"But it's important, Andy! You have to help me! I have to get to the boy!" She brought up a wand and screamed "Crucio!"

Two things happened at once. The china cabinet that the wand was pointing at, which was no where near Andromeda, blew apart, as did all the plates, cups, and wine glasses stored in it.

And Bellatrix screamed with all the power of her lungs, and fell off the chair. She curled into a fetal position, twitching and whimpering. She slowly got up.

"It's got to stop. I have to find Longbottom. If Nymphie is out of school, then the boy's probably in Hogwarts. He is! I can see it in your eyes!"

"Don't, Trixie! He's guarded. You won't get to him!"

"Good bye, Andy. I'm sorry." Bellatrix left Andromeda's wand on the table in front of her, and left the house. Andromeda thought she heard the sound of an Apparition.

Several hours later she would be released by her husband, and spend a long time being interviewed by an intimidating Auror named Kingsley Shacklebolt. She would go over the whole event in excruciating detail several times. They would threaten her with Veritaserum, the most potent truth potion available, and she would agree to take it, but they didn't use it so she assumed it was a bluff. They asked the same questions multiple times with different wording, until she couldn't take it any more. Finally it was over, and they worked on cleaning up the house, and having their Halloween party. Ted kept looking around nervously.

There was one thing she didn't tell the Aurors. She did tell them what Trixie has said, but she didn't add her interpretation of the tone she said it. Andromeda sighed. That final "good bye" sounded so, so final.

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"Hey, Bob! Why didn't you tell me about the new exhibit?"

"What new exhibit?"

"Our new friend in the Big Cat house."

"What are you talking about, Jo? There's no new exhibit."

"Right. I suppose you didn't put up the sign, either."

"Enough playing around, we have work to do."

"You mean you didn't put our new resident in Leo's old cage?"

"No one is in Leo's old cage; although I'm thinking you might be a good candidate for a room with bars and lots of padding."

"Come on, take a look, then you explain it."

"Damn! She wasn't there last night when I checked."

"Then where did she come from. And what happened to Leo's sign? They don't make cast iron signs like that any more. Except for this one and it looks as old as Leo's!"

"Same style, too. Someone went to a lot of trouble to give us this animal."

"Look what followed me home! Can I keep her? I promise to take care of her, and give her milk, and everything!"

"Oh, shut up! I want to know where she came from, how healthy she is, and how the hell they snuck her in here without anyone noticing. You don't just hide a big cat under your coat!"

"But can we keep her? Can we afford it?"

"Leo was budgeted through June. With his not-quite-unexpected demise I thought we'd have a little extra, but we can afford her. Where the hell did they get sign just like Leo's?"

They looked at the cast iron sign that replaced the one that used to identify the old lion that lived here. The old sign had read:

LEO

Panthera leo

The new one proclaimed:

Warriorette

Panthera onca

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock, etc., liked to read the Muggle news papers to watch for clues to Voldemort's return. He diligently searched for suspicious deaths and other events that might be Voldemort or Death Eater activity.

He completely overlooked the mysterious appearance of a new animal at the Surrey Zoo.

Chapter 13

Kisses

"Hi, Luna."

"Hello, Liz. How are your Animagus lessons going?" Liz had just entered the Ravenclaw common room, and saw that Luna was sitting alone, doing some homework.

"I don't know. We took the potion that lets us see what animal we change into, and I'm a mouse." She answered, a sorrowful note in her voice.

"Oh," Luna said, a little sorrowfully. "I didn't know. You could continue, anyway?"

"I don't think so. It's just so small!" She plopped into the next chair over and put her elbows on the table and her head in her hands. "If I wanted to spy or sneak around, maybe, but that's not what I want to do. Almost anything else would have been better. I guess being a bug would have been worse."

"I am sorry. If I could change it, I would."

"Me, too. I guess it's just one of those things. But anyway, can I ask you something?" She sat up, and her voice dropped in volume.

"Sure," Luna answered, but her voice made it sound like she wasn't sure.

"What's going on between you and Harry?"

"Not much, lately. He seems to spend every free moment practicing Quidditch, so I've joined the Charms club. It's not bad. We practice all these charms that are actually taught in the sixth and seventh year elective, Household Magic. So far I know about a third of them from helping my mum around the house."

"But what's with the hair, and the kissing? Isn't he your cousin or something."

"Distant relative, yes. That's about the only time we get together these days. And we've even missed some of those if he has too much homework backed up because of Quidditch. I like the game as much as anyone else. . . . Actually that's not true. I'm getting to hate it because Harry is spending all his time at it. But it is a fun game, and exciting to watch, don't you think? I don't know how it would be if they still used golden Snidgets instead of the Snitch for the Seeker to capture. Do you think it would be more difficult catching a real bird than the Snitch? I don't know if I could have done that -- fly full speed at a little bird and grab it out of the air -- I'd be so afraid of hurting the little thing? Have you ever seen a Snidget? We saw one in an aviary in France a few years ago. It was a magic aviary and they had the most interesting creatures. Ever hear a Fwooper? The song is quite nice, but I hear it can drive you insane if you listen too long. Well, I have to go look up some spells for the Charms club, so I'll see you later, Liz."

"But, Luna. . . ." she said to the back of the blond. She felt rather dizzy, and thought that that might be why some people called her Looney. She'd have to ask another time.

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It was the first Ravenclaw Quidditch game of the year. They were playing against the Hufflepuff team. The previous week the Slytherins had crushed the Gryffindors with a combination of rough, illegal play, and Draco catching the Snitch. It was a cold, rainy day, and Harry didn't think any of the players, or very many of the spectators, had enjoyed the game.

He couldn't say that it was any warmer today, but it wasn't raining and the sun was shining. It just felt better, and the crowd was enthusiastic. Last year the Ravenclaws had lost to Hufflepuff. It was Cho Chang's first game, and Cedric Diggory had caught the Snitch, clinching the game. Cedric was still the Hufflepuff's Seeker, but they had replaced two of the three Chasers and one of the Beaters. The Ravenclaw team had a lot more experience.

Harry and the other reserves suited up in their Ravenclaw Blue Quidditch uniforms and watched the game from just outside the changing room. Harry thought it was a different perspective from below.

The Ravenclaw team did overwhelm the Hufflepuffs. In a game that was about skill rather than physical strength, the 'Claws proved they had the skill. They were up seventy-ten when the Seekers spotted the Snitch near the base of the Hufflepuff goals. Unfortunately for Cedric, he was above the Ravenclaw goals at the time. He raced after Cho, who started near the center of the pitch, but there was no way he could catch up. As Cho swooped in, she lost concentration, and slammed into the goal post.

The reason for her accident became apparent as dozens of Dementors made their way on to the field, from every entrance, spreading gloom and despair. Harry dropped to his knees as he heard the screaming woman, and then her voice saying, "Not Harry, please not Harry!"

The high pitched voice answered, "Stand aside you silly girl!"

But the woman -- his mum? -- wouldn't, "Kill me instead --"

The other voice -- Voldemort's? -- laughed and said, "Avada Kadavra!" and, suddenly there was a visual component to the memory -- a flash of sickly, green light. His eyes cleared and he found himself on the ground, as were the other reservists and the players from both teams. Dumbledore was in the middle of the pitch with a face unlike any he had ever seen the headmaster wear. Dumbledore was furious.

Harry looked around; there were no Dementors on the field now. Madam Pomfrey was by Cho, and Remus was going around to the downed players. Harry smiled as he noticed their defense professor handing out what he assumed was chocolate. A house elf appeared next to Remus and handed him some more bars. The professor then walked over to the changing room.

"Here you go, Mr. Lovegood, Mr. Lynch, Mr. Bixler. Eat this, you'll feel better. I'm not sure what will happen with the game, but Professor Dumbledore has sent the Dementors off the school grounds. You're the last of the players I have to take care of. I need to get to the stands and help hand out chocolate up there. You're alright, you three?" Harry nodded. The chocolate was making him feel better. Professor Lupin headed to the stands. The three reservists got up, brushed themselves off, and headed to where the rest of the team was collecting.

They watched as Pomfrey conjured a stretcher and levitated Cho off the field. Roger checked with Pomfrey. It looked like he got a curt reply, and then he came jogging back to the group.

"Cho's out, whether we restart the game or not. There must have been fifty or sixty Dementors on the pitch. I noticed a lot of students in the front seats dropping. It will probably be a few minutes until we hear if the game is going on. Lovegood, you're in. Remember what you practiced."

Harry nodded. It had been drilled into him that the Seekers stayed above the rest of the players for a reason. Besides giving a good view of the whole field, it kept them out of the way of the Chasers (although there was a tactic for disrupting the other side's Chasers, but they hadn't practiced that enough and felt he shouldn't use it in a game.) They waited, and eventually Madam Hooch called the two captains together. Roger and Cedric Diggory both claimed their teams were ready to resume, so they took to the air.

Harry loved this. One option he had was to dog the other Seeker, in the hopes that if either of them saw the snitch, he might out fly Cedric and get to the Snitch first. But Cedric's Cleansweep 6 was considered slightly faster than the Fireball, so Harry would have to spot the Snitch first. He set up a quick figure eight pattern near the middle of the pitch. Cedric did a more leisurely oval near the middle. Neither was going to make Cedric's earlier mistake of being too far to one side.

Suddenly a shout went up from the crowd. Harry wasn't sure who saw it first, but he and Cedric both started after the Snitch at almost

the same time. It looked like a forgone conclusion that Cedric would reach it first because he was closer. But Harry was flying faster in his search pattern and was already at full speed before Cedric could get lined up with the Snitch, which was hovering near the ground.

As they dived, they started getting close to the players. A Bludger flew past Harry; he barely modified his angle of descent to avoid it. Cedric almost ran into one of his own team's Chasers and lost speed. Harry aimed low -- if the Snitch changed directions, as it was likely to do, he would be following it. If it changed directions towards him, he wouldn't overshoot it.

As Harry predicted, it did suddenly change directions. It headed off at a right angle, and he saw Cedric struggling to change course. Harry angled his broom and snatched the little golden ball out of the air as he sped past it. He stopped his broom and held up the Snitch. His teammates were around him, pounding him on the back and congratulating him.

Cedric came over, "Excellent flying, Lovegood! Good game."

"I was lucky. If it had gone up or down out of my reach at the last moment I would have missed, and you would have been in an excellent position."

"If you say so. I'm looking forward to next years re-match." And he shook Harry's hand.

That evening at the victory party, Luna approached Harry.

"We should bring some of these treats to Cho."

"To Cho? After the way she teases you?"

"Yes, because that's what she does. That shouldn't change what we do. And what about that golden rule you were telling me about."

"He who has the gold makes the rules?"

She hit him playfully. "No, the one about doing to others."

Harry's classics reading, which Selene insisted they keep up even during the school year, now consisted of the Vulgate. It was about a third the length of the Old Testament, but the main narrative was repeated four times. Each one was different, though, and Mike Daly said that each had a different emphasis and target audience. He thought the letters that made up most of it while full of good advice, weren't too cohesive. But he had found the Golden Rule in it.

"Alright, I'll bring her some."

- - -

The evening study hall was breaking up. There was some milling about as the people who knew each other from different years and different houses took the opportunity to visit. Harry was talking with Neville, Draco, and Hermione when Professor Lupin walked over. He had sat at the staff table and any students that had questions would go up to him and ask. He was one of the more popular teachers who took turns in the Great Hall in the evening.

Things had changed again. The studying students hung out in the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables, while the Hufflepuff table (especially near the rebuilt fireplace) had become the center of games between people of rival houses. Chess, gobstones, and quieter games of exploding Snap would take place over there. Those groups were usually, but not exclusively, by age. It usually depended on the amount of homework as to which age groups would gather there.

With the next Quidditch games scheduled for April, the teams wouldn't be practicing as much, and Harry would be able to join his classmates at the study group more often. Luna hadn't been there, though, and he wasn't sure where she was. But at the moment, he was rehashing Quidditch experiences with Draco and picking up a bit of what the third years were studying.

Professor Lupin said, "Alright kids, you should head back to your own common rooms before curfew. By the way, Harry, good game. You fly

just like your father -- like you were born on a broom. Of course, he was a chaser, but you get the idea."

Harry answered, "Thank you, Professor Lupin." Then the group headed to the Entrance Hall where they went their own ways. Hermione looked at Harry funny as she followed him up to the Ravenclaw tower.

- - -

Harry stopped in Remus' office off the DADA classroom and said, "Professor Lupin?"

Remus looked up from the papers he was grading and answered, "Ah, hello, Harry. Here for another Animagus lesson? We usually have those on Mondays."

"No. Actually I was wondering if there's something to protect us from the Dementors."

"Yes, there is a spell that can drive them away, but it's quite advanced magic. I'm talking beyond N.E.W.T. level, Harry. And even if I taught you, you might not be able to perform it in the presence of a Dementor."

"I'd like to try to learn it."

"Very well, Harry. We'll begin with the basic spell and if you master that, we'll see what we can do about exposing you to the Dementor's influence under a controlled environment.

"Now, Harry, the wand movement is just a flick, and the incantation is Expecto Patronum. However, just doing that won't help. You have to power it with good emotions, the same emotions that a Dementor drives out of your mind so it can revel in the feelings associated with your worst memories. Now, think of a good memory, and try the spell."

- - -

"Come on, Harry." Luna grabbed his arm as they were leaving the Great Hall after dinner.

"What? Where are we going?"

"Someplace we should have visited a long time ago."

"Shouldn't we be getting our stuff for the study group?"

"Later. And you've missed so many why are you worrying about it now?" She kept taking him up stairs.

"But that was because of Quidditch practice. I've never been here before."

"That's because we don't have any classes up here."

"Where are we?"

"In the North tower. Come on."

"How high are we going?"

"All the way to the top."

"Well, what now?" Harry asked when they reached the top of the spiral staircase they had been climbing. They were in a room without doors but Luna pointed Harry at a sign on the ceiling next to a trap door.

"Sibyll Trelawney, Divination teacher," Harry read. "And?"

"Aunt Sibyll!" Luna yelled. The trap door opened, and a silver ladder came down.

"Aunt Sibyll?" Harry asked, following Luna up the ladder.

"Yes, Daddy's sister." They climbed through the opening to a room filled with little tables and chintz armchairs. The room was hot, and a

fire blazed in the fireplace. There was a smell of incense in the air, and the few lamps that were lit were covered in red scarves.

"Hello, children. What can I do for you?" 'Aunt Sibyll' appeared at a door. She was covered in chains and beads, and had thick glasses that made her eyes appear very large. They were brown with flecks of gray like her brother's. Her hair was long and stringy, like Luna's when Harry didn't brush it. She was very thin, and entered with a swaying motion.

"Hello, Aunt Sibyll. I'm Luna!"

Trelawney peered at the blond. "I know, dear. I've was expecting you to show up tonight. I seem to be a little off with my timing, though. I had planned on having tea with you. Just one moment."

She quickly filled a kettle with water and put it over the fire, which she banked down. Harry noticed that Luna kept looking around with a concerned expression. They sat at one of the little tables, and Harry thought he smelled wine on Professor Trelawney's breath.

She turned to Harry and said, "I apologize dear, the crystal shows faces, of course, but not names. However, I do see a long and happy life for the two of you. You aren't interested in politics, are you? I think I see you in the office of Minister of Magic. You are?"

"This is Harry, Aunt Sibyll. Surely you've talked to Daddy since he came to live with us?"

"Your father? Aunt? Oh, you're little Luna! My, how you've grown! I remember your second birthday. And now look at you! A first year Hogwarts student! Where does the time go?"

"Second year, Aunt Sibyll."

"Of course, dear. When you have an inner eye as active as mine, these little details sometimes become blurred. It's so nice to see you again."

"Daddy and Mum wanted me to ask you if you would come to our house for Christmas Eve dinner."

"I'm sure I have nothing going on. I shall certainly be there, if the auguries say so. That is so nice of you to invite me."

"Dad has been inviting you for years. He says you always have something else going on. He was starting to think you didn't like him."

"Not like Larry? He's the sweetest man! No one could have a nicer little brother. Did I ever tell you about the time. . . ." They spent a nice tea listening to tales of Sibyll's and Larry's childhoods. It meant more to Luna than to Harry, but he enjoyed it too. Finally the tea ran out and they were getting ready to go.

Harry asked, "Professor? If you're Uncle Larry's sister, why isn't your name Lovegood too?"

She looked confused for a moment then smiled. "Trelawney was our mother's name. When it turned out that I had the sight, it was useful to go by an established name. You do know that I'm great-great-granddaughter of Cassandra Trelawney, the celebrated Seer? It was mostly name recognition, you know. It's a hard, cruel world out there, and you need every advantage to make it though. Do come back! I enjoyed our chat immensely!"

Harry and Luna went down the steps.

Harry commented on their way back to the Ravenclaw tower, "She seems nice. A little. . . ."

"Looney?" Luna asked with a smile. "Maybe it runs in the family, after all Dad and you are too."

"Me!" His protest was cut off by Luna's laugh. He joined in. "Ok, maybe I inherited some craziness from Uncle Larry. But I don't think so. If I got it from anywhere, it was you."

"Harry, did you notice all the magic up there?"

"No. But then I'm just a rhinoceros, not someone in possession of mage sight."

"There's mind magic up there."

"You said the whole castle is filled with magic."

"Yes. For example the room was magically expanding to be bigger than the area of the North Tower."

"Even I noticed that."

"But there's other magic up there. Can I borrow your book on Wands and Enchanting?"

"Sure. What're you going to do?"

"Try to figure out what I saw up there."

- - -

Harry and Luna were walking into the Great Hall for dinner.

"I'll see you in a few minutes, Harry."

"OK, I'll save you a seat."

Luna waited by the door for a few minutes until she saw the person she wanted to talk to.

"Hello, Neville!"

"Hey, Luna."

"Did you want to come to Charms Club tonight?"

"Oh, yes! Do come, Neville," Lavender Brown put in. She had been just a little behind Neville, walking with several other Gryffindors.

"My, Luna, you're a fast worker," teased Parvati Patil.

Neville turned red, and started to stammer something.

"Oh, be quiet, you. You're embarrassing Neville. And I'm just inviting him as a friend. After all the Charms club meets on Hogsmeade days, and Neville might like something to keep himself occupied during those. Neville, Parvati and Lavender are both in Charms Club, so don't let them talk you out of it. If they didn't enjoy it, they would have quit a long time ago.

"She's right, Neville," Lavender said. "It is fun. Why don't you join us."

Neville wasn't feeling so embarrassed now. "OK, I'll try it."

Luna left the two Gryffindors telling Neville about the club and went to join Harry for dinner.

- - -

Harry and Luna were sitting in the Ravenclaw common room between classes in early December.

"Luna, can I get my wand book back?"

"Of course, Harry. Is there something specific you need from it?"

"Yes. How to make a wand. Hagrid is getting me some more sticks from the Forbidden Forest, and I was going to try to create the core hole in them. I ruined the entire first batch of sticks he got for me. Stupid Dementors I could go and get my own materials."

"It's called forbidden because your not supposed to go out there."

"Yeah, well. . . ."

"What do you have for cores?"

"Just potion ingredients. And my own hair and blood. I can't wait to start Ancient Runes and get real help doing runes. . . ."

"Yeah, the runes section of your book doesn't give much practical help in engraving them." She held up her wand. "I don't know how Uncle Ollie does it. There are no runes visible at all."

"We'll have to ask him."

"I'll go get the book."

- - -

"Aunt Sibyll?" Luna called. She was alone at the moment. Harry was at the study group in the Great Hall. The ladder descended and she went up. Sibyll wasn't in the room, so she looked around. There was something here -- something like a ward, but not quite. It was right around here, but she couldn't see it. She wished Harry was here. But she had come straight from Charms Club, and Harry wasn't with her. She sighed.

"Helloooooo! How lovely that came to visit me, dear." Sibyll entered the room, weaving a bit.

"Hello, Aunt Sibyll. How are you?"

"I'm just fine! I must say, I wasn't expecting any visitors tonight. I get so few visitors, you know." She fell more than sat in one of the overstuffed chairs. "It's very quiet up here. That's so important for the inner eye. Do you have the gift, my dear?"

"I'm Luna. And I don't think so."

"Pity. But it's quite a burden, you know, knowing what coming, and never being able to do anything about it. I've known all day that you were coming. Still, events transpired so I wouldn't be out here when you showed up."

"Aunt Sibyll, you don't have to pretend with me. I'm family."

"What are you implying?"

"When you first saw me, you said you weren't expecting any visitors. You don't have to pretend that your gift foresaw me coming. I know it doesn't work all the time. It's alright to just be Aunt Sibyll when we're alone."

"Like all gifts, if you don't use it it will attrö. . . uh, attra . . . it will go away."

"That's fine, but don't make things up for me. Just be yourself. If you can't be yourself in your own family, where can you do it?"

"I'll . . . I'll try."

"Are you still planning on coming to our house Christmas Eve?"

"Of course! I wouldn't miss it for the world."

After talking for a little while, Luna finally had to go to be back in the Ravenclaw tower before curfew. They said their goodbyes, and Luna looked around the room, once more. It was there, but she just couldn't see it!

- - -

On Christmas Eve they eventually gave up waiting for Sibyll, and sat down to eat. Luna kept insisting that Sibyll had promised, but she didn't show up the whole evening.

Uncle Ollie was there, and Harry and Luna (to a lesser extent) discussed wand making. He had perfected a method of putting the required runes on the inside of the wand, where the wand core went. Harry and he discussed Harry's problems with wand making. Part of the problem turned out to be Harry's work area -- it was almost impossible to magically carve a straight wand while holding it in your hands. The best way is to clamp it down, and carve it slowly. And carving out the hole through it for the core -- well Ollie went so far as to say it was impossible to do freehand.

"Really? I didn't try to make the core hole but my third attempt was pretty good, if I say so myself. But I've never gotten such good results since."

"May I see it?"

"Sure, Uncle Ollie, I'll be right back." Harry ran off towards his room. He came back a minute later holding a wand. Ollivander took it and looked at it with a critical eye. He gave it a wave.

"Number three? The larch. Eleven and three quarters, slightly springy. Yes, I can see that doing such a good job on your third attempt would have raised your expectations. You certainly did a good job shaping and smoothing it. But as I said, it is almost impossible to get such results without using the proper tools. Look," he said, putting the wand on the table. Using one finger near the point to roll it, they could clearly see that the wand wasn't straight. "Fifteen hundred years ago, this would have been an excellent wand. However, the craft has advanced a little since then. I can see that the book I gave you didn't describe many of the practical aspects of making a wand. You must come to my shop soon, and I will show you the modern tools of the trade!"

They talked wand making until it was time to go home. Harry thought Uncle Ollie could have talked wand making all night.

- - -

The annual Boxing Day party at Sirius' had grown by a few more people. Mr. and Mrs. Jones, Hestia's parents were also there. Harry didn't think anything of it, but heard several other adults commenting on Sirius and Hestia "getting serious;" usually that was followed by a joke about Uncle Sirius' name. Even he was getting tired of that joke by the end of the night.

Draco took Neville, Harry, and Luna aside for their annual "pure blood" persuasion speech. Harry brought up the fact that Hermione was considered one of the smartest witches in the school, and she was a Muggle born.

Neville countered, "But you have to admit that she works harder than the rest of us."

"That's true," Luna put in. "She studies almost every night after the study groups. Of course, most Ravenclaws do."

"But there's at least two other Muggle-born second years in Ravenclaw, too." Harry said.

Neville added, "And after Hermione left Gryffindor, they have no Muggle born second year students. Yet they probably get the lowest grades."

"If you ignore Crabbe and Goyle," Draco said.

Harry finished his argument with, "But if blood mattered that much, then you'd expect the pure bloods to be at the top of the class."

"Unless the whole school system is biased," Neville suggested.

Ron showed up about then, and he and Hermione, whom he tolerated at these gatherings, joined the others.

Luna got the last word in, since they knew they couldn't discuss this around Ron. "If we're going to overthrow the school system, let's do it for something important, like getting rid of the drafts. Those corridors are cold when the wind blows."

Ron asked, "Are you going to overthrow the school."

Luna answered, "Probably not. To get something changed at the school we'd probably have to overthrow the whole government. Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!"

Hermione put in, "Viva la revolution!"

"Huh?" Ron looked confused.

The other students laughed, and Harry said, "Don't worry Ron. When we overthrow the government, we'll put you in charge of

Quidditch." Ron still looked confused, but went along with the joke, proposing sweeping changes to the Quidditch rules to help the Chudley Cannons win.

Later, Harry got Neville alone.

"Neville, I know why Draco says what he says about pure bloods, but I don't understand why you seem to support him?"

Neville smiled, and said, "I think it's the Hufflepuff in me."

"Huh?"

"I know Draco's father questions Draco. If he knew that Draco wasn't getting anywhere with us, what do you think his father would do?"

"I don't know."

"He'd probably stop him from coming to these parties. This way he can tell his father that he's getting through to at least one person. Maybe. It doesn't cost anything to say almost supportive things when he tries to convince us. If you listen to what I said, I didn't really support him. I just didn't disagree with him."

"I guess."

"Don't worry, Harry, I'm not a pure blood bigot."

"No, but I think you're a Slytherin in disguise."

"Naaa! Probably just Draco rubbing off on me."

- - -

Among his gifts, Harry received a knife from Sirius that was supposed to open any lock. The lock picking ability, however, was whispered later. Harry thought the knife would come in useful for carving runes.

- - -

At one point during the party Hermione caught Sirius away from the crowd.

"Mr. Black?"

"Sirius, please. When you call me Mr. Black, I feel old. What can I do for you, Hermione?"

"Can you tell me about Harry's real parents? I know that Mr. and Mrs. Lovegood aren't his parents, and he never talks about them."

"They were killed in the war against Voldemort. Have you studied that?"

"I've read Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century, Modern Magical History. . . ."

"Then you know how dangerous it was and how many people died. Harry's parents were among the many killed at that time."

"But can you tell me about them?"

Sirius looked at Hermione for a minute. "No," he finally said. "The stories are Harry's to tell, or Harry's to not tell if he doesn't feel like it."

"But you knew them well enough to be his godfather!"

"But it's not my stories to tell. And if you're really Harry's friend, you'll leave him alone about this."

"But. . . ."

"No." And he walked away.

The party finished up with the traditional game of exploding snap. Harry noticed that Luna won the first and last hands. She smiled at him when she did. He smiled back.

- - -

Harry spent two days with Ollivander in his shop during the holiday. He got to see the workshop, work with the tools a professional used, and a practical introduction to the materials used in a core. Harry found it fascinating, and started looking forward to the summer when Uncle Ollie would help him go through the process of creating a wand from start to finish.

- - -

As such things happen, the Christmas break came to an end, too soon and too slow. Parents and students were already missing each other as they said their goodbyes on platform nine and three quarters. They were also looking forward to a little quiet (the parents) and getting back with their friends (the students).

The Lovegoods were no different in that respect than any other group. They hugged and kissed their children goodbye, and started talking with friends. Larry, but mostly Selene, conversed with Augusta Longbottom. Harry and Luna greeted Neville and exchanged stories about the break when suddenly there was a flash of light.

A woman in bright green robes rushed up to the children, and exploded with questions, a quill and parchment floating beside her.

"Neville Longbottom? May I call you Neville? How does it feel knowing that a Death Eater is out there, biding her time, waiting for the chance to get you?"

"I, uh. . . ."

"How do you think your parents would handle this situation? Would they pull you out of Hogwarts. . . ."

Suddenly, the parchment beside her burst into flame.

Larry had his wand in hand, pointing at the woman in green. "His parents were Aurors, and would throw you into jail for assaulting his son."

"Lovegood. How nice to see you. Still publishing that rag?"

"Get out of here, Skeeter. Considering how hard the Ministry is trying to keep Neville safe, do you think they'd appreciate you taunting Lestrangle with the fact that she's unable to get at him?"

"I'm doing no such thing."

"I doubt that the Ministry would see it that way," Selene added. She had joined her husband after getting the children on the train.

"And if that photo ever sees the light of day," Augusta added, "I doubt the paper will be very happy with the lawsuit I would bring if Lestrangle was given a current photo of her target."

Skeeter left in a huff. Her photographer followed.

- - -

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jo. It's me, Bob."

"Hi, Bob. What's up."

"Warriorette is missing."

"WHAT?"

"The cage is empty."

"Is this some sort of joke?"

"No more a joke than her mysterious arrival."

"Hang on. I'll be right there. Damn. Like we need this kind of publicity."

- - -

"Stupefy!"

"Ennervate."

"Bellatrix!" Sirius found himself tied to a chair in the first floor parlor. The escaped prisoner, his cousin, stood in front of him, wand ready.

"Hello, Sirius. All those years, and I didn't know you were in Azkaban with me. We could have talked about old times, before the Dementors stole them from us."

"I was innocent, Bellatrix. There was nothing to say to any of you Death Eaters."

"Yes, I suppose. But do you remember when we were children, Sirius? I don't. Not really. We were taught that the Dementors feed on all the bad memories, but I don't think that's right. I remember all the bad times just fine. I think that they feed on the good ones, because they seem all gone now."

"Are you here to kill me, Bella?"

"Oh, Sirius! You know I hate that name. Why didn't you ever call me Trixie like my sisters did?"

Sirius remained quiet, glaring at the gaunt, black haired woman in front of him.

"What do you want, Bella?"

She gave a snarl, and yelled, "Crucio!" while pointing to the case that once held so many dark objects. The case blew up, and Bellatrix fell to the floor of the parlor, screaming as if the curse was cast on her. Sirius had talked to Andromeda. Bella must really be insane, he thought. The woman got back on her feet.

"I want it to end, Sirius. I want it to stop hurting. It was a bad idea to come here. You make me so mad I do that. No more. It was a mistake to come. I see that now." She pointed her wand at the bound Sirius.

"I came for my locket, but it doesn't matter. Give it to Cissy."

"I already did. I must say. . . ."

"Stupefy! I don't need to hear what you have to say about our picture."

When he woke up, he was untied. As far as he could tell, except for the broken display case, there was no other damage to the house.

- - -

"She was gone! I swear!"

"Have you been drinking, Bob?"

"Honest, Jo! I was in there! The cage was empty!"

"Good night, Bob."

- - -

Peter Pettigrew was not having a good trip. The attempt to rob that drunk Parisian wizard had netted him a few Galleons, but had also got his arm sliced with a cutting curse. It was slowly healing. His face was too well known to go to any reputable healer. He had eventually gone to a Muggle doctor who sewed his arm up like a piece of cloth, and gave him a paper to take to a chemist. He was given a small bottle of pills to help avoid gangrene and other problems he didn't quite understand. He ate them all after leaving the shop. As bad tasting as a potion. His arm wasn't feeling much better, though.

And then with his limited Apparation ability, general ill health, and weakened condition after being in Azkaban, it had taken him several weeks to reach Albania. He had had to stop for over a week in Greece because his arm was too bad. He had awoken in a Muggle hospital. With a couple of days of care he was feeling better and left before the magical community realized he was there. At least the sewing was out of his arm.

Once in Albania he was more relaxed. The independent kingdoms of various wizards -- living, undead, or dead but with such legends that everyone just leaves those areas alone -- were not going to be on the lookout for him. Especially as he was being referred to as Voldemort's henchman. Most of the other overlords would either ignore him out of fear of Voldemort or indifference to the demands of the British wizarding government. It was nice having a powerful master. He hoped, with a shiver.

He was getting close. It had been many years, but some things don't change -- the shapes of rocks, the surrounding peaks. The trees were different, the trail gone, but the signs were still there. He reached the cliff. In the cool of the Albanian winter night he shivered again. He wasn't dressed for this nor was he in good enough shape for wandering around in the wilderness. How did a whole mountain range get an anti-Apparation field around it? No wonder no other magical government thought it worthwhile to take over this forsaken bit of the world.

He searched. This was the third cliff he thought was the right one. Something flew overhead. He reached in his pocket for the crucifix. He held it up, knowing that to a vampire it would be a blinding light that they couldn't approach. After a few minutes, he resumed his examination of the cliff.

He found it! He removed the rock to reveal a hole big enough to put his arm into. He rolled up his sleeve as far as he could and stuck his arm in almost to the shoulder. It was an awkward position. It had been designed so. His dark mark on the arm flared with pain. He clenched his teeth and kept quiet. A moment later the pain started to fade and a door opened in the cliff. He quickly replaced the rock and entered Voldemort's hide out.

He ignored the snake-motif of the hall and moved quickly to the throne room. The large room, reminiscent of the Chamber of Secrets, although Pettigrew didn't know that, was empty. Worse than empty -- which he had expected. It was -- he groped for a word -- empty. It was missing the presence he was expecting. He searched the complex and could not find evidence of Voldemort anywhere. He ended up back in the throne room. His master was gone. Could he

consider trying to live on his own? He had spent ten years as a rat. It was possible.

He pondered his options as he stood next to the throne. There were definite advantages. The lack of the pain curse was one. He had gotten used to not being tortured. If his old master wasn't around, that wasn't his fault. But where could he go? He was a wanted wizard. He sat to plan his next move.

"Wormtail!"

He jumped from the throne and looked around.

"Master?" he cried in fear.

"Come to Riddle Manor, now!"

"Yes master!" he was frantically looking around.

"Then you will make me a homiculus."

There was no further communication. He never did find out that sitting on the throne caused an old spell to activate, allowing Voldemort to know who was sitting on his chair, and allowed him to speak to that person. Or kill the fool who would dare sit on Lord Voldemort's throne.

Pettigrew wearily made his way to the entrance of the hideout. He now had to journey across Europe again and return to the country most interested in capturing him. He shivered.

- - -

"Aunt Sibyll!" Luna yelled, once more below the Divination classroom. The silver ladder magically extended to the floor, and she and Harry climbed up.

Professor Trelawney wasn't in sight. They got to work quickly.

"Mind magic, doesn't seem to affect us. Sort of flows right around you," Luna said.

"Specific to certain conditions, or a certain person, maybe. Flowing from where?"

"That direction, but there's something else with it, and I'm sure I'm being affected by it. I can't see the source of either of them."

"Let's move in. From the fireplace?"

"No."

"The mantle?"

"I'd have to say, yes. But I can't get a fix."

"Not a ward?"

"Similar, but not."

"An anti-notice charm?"

"That's it! That has to be it. Whatever it is is right here, but we can't notice it!"

They were interrupted by their aunt's voice, "Hello dears! How wonderful of you to come visit me!"

"Aunt Sibyll! Are you feeling well?" Luna asked, moving away from the fireplace.

Harry stared at it for a moment. Candle holders and candles, a deck of Tarot cards, a shawl, an eyeglass case. If the object was unnoticeable, it wouldn't be any of those. He put his hand to left of the candle holder on the right side of the mantle.

"Of course I'm well. Why wouldn't I be?"

He started moving his hand slowly to the left, gently touching each object as he came to it.

"We were worried when you didn't show up at the Christmas Eve dinner."

"Oh! I was going to go, wasn't I? I think I may not have been feeling well that night. I was so looking forward to it."

Harry's hand reached the other candle stick, but he was sure something strange had happened in between. He was sure he hadn't moved his arm straight across, but didn't remember -- or notice -- moving it around anything. He cursed under his breath, and turned back to Luna and Aunt Sibyll. Luna was talking about the holidays. Harry went over to her, and gave a little shake of his head. She nodded and continued talking.

"Will we see you at a meal in the Great Hall?" Luna asked, changing the subject.

"Well, the noise and activity, it's so hard on the inner eye. . . ."

"Aunt Sibyll! Remember, 'family'! Is there a real reason you don't eat in the Great Hall?"

"I just don't like leaving the tower. I almost never do it. The last time I did was. . . . Goodness gracious! The last time was last summer when the Headmaster took me to dinner in Diagon Alley, and I did some shopping afterwards. No wait, I've been to some teacher's meetings, too. I almost never go, but sometimes when the Headmaster asks me personally, I attend."

Harry and Luna tried to get her to agree to come down for a meal some time, but she resisted.

"We'll be back to visit you, Aunt Sibyll," Luna said. After they left she stopped Harry on the stairs of the tower.

"I'm sure it's a spell to keep her in the tower."

"Who would do that to her?"

"I think she told us."

"Huh?"

"When was the last time she left her room?"

"Teacher's meetings. Last summer. . . ."

"And who was she with?"

"Dumble. . . . But why? Why would he lock her in?"

"I don't know, but we have to rescue her. She's family."

"We'd have to rescue her even if she wasn't family."

"Oh, of course, Harry."

- - -

January brought with it the return of Quidditch. Roger Davies kept vacillating between Cho and Harry as the Seeker. Any good will Cho might have had for Harry for his kindness after the first game was quickly worn away as they competed for the Seeker spot. It wasn't until the morning of the game that Roger decided to go with Cho. He wanted Harry suited up as the reserve, though, and warned Cho that he would wouldn't hesitate to replace her during the game.

Harry decided that the match against Slytherin seemed to go the way many matches against Slytherin went: painfully for the other team. Lacking finesse, they tried to bully themselves to victory on the field. The Ravenclaws kept the score slightly in their favor, despite the physical nature of the Slytherin play. They played to their strengths, and knew a lot more Quidditch formations than the other teams. They would switch with a signal, and suddenly a Forward Slash would become an Eagle's Dive. They were up by thirty points, but it was all for naught.

From what Harry could see, Cho saw the snitch first. She didn't move directly at it, but tried to position herself better. Something in her demeanor gave the game away, though, and Draco sped off after it

right before she did. His Nimbus 2001 was faster, and he reached the Snitch first. Unfortunately, it zigged when he zagged, and flew towards the ground. Cho followed it down, while Draco pulled into a tight turn to aim at the snitch again. The snitch dropped even lower, and doubled back. Cho made a grab for it, missed, and plowed into the muddy ground. Draco flew at the little golden ball, and got it.

- - -

Harry became really busy after that. Even though they didn't have another game until April 30th, they practiced hard three times a week. With Slitherin having won two of it's matches, they would have to beat Gryffindor, their last match, to have a chance at the Quidditch cup, provided that Hufflepuff beat Slytherin. It was a long shot, but Roger was an optimist, and a task master.

He also had an evening a week with Remus working on his animagus transformation, and another working on the Patronus. The first was going slowly. He had transformed his left hand into a rhino's foot. He was still having problems with his right hand. Remus thought it was psychological -- his right hand being the one he wrote with and did magic with. Without it, he'd really be handicapped. His Patronus activity was going better.

It was a couple weeks after Christmas break that he achieved a corporate Patronus.

"Expecto Patronum!" He yelled, thinking of a sunset in the Rocky Mountains that he had shared with Luna. He was imagining the feelings, reliving the moment, with more concentration than he had ever used before. And suddenly the silver mist flowed out of his wand and formed into a shape.

"Harry, what is that?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Wow! I don't believe it! Professor, you said that no one knows why people have specific Patronuses, right? I would have never imagined this one in a million years!"

"But, Harry. . . ."

"Let's make sure I can do that again! Expecto Patronum!" The animal formed again. "Yes! This is so neat, Professor! I have to tell Luna!" Harry raced out of the room.

"But, Harry. . . ." Remus tried one last time as the brown haired boy ran out of the Defense classroom.

He raced to the Great Hall, but a quick look showed that she wasn't with the study group. He ran to the library, but again, no there. Finally he headed back to the Ravenclaw common room. She wasn't there, but Cho and her friends were.

"Well, if it isn't the shrimp who thinks he can play Seeker," she said, as he ran into the room.

"Last I heard, the Seeker was supposed to catch the Golden Snitch. You should try it sometime." He looked around and saw Larry Pohlen, one of his dorm mates. "Hey, Larry. Have you seen Luna?"

Cho answered, "Oh, you finally realized that she's been seeing boys behind your back. I was wondering when you'd notice. Too bad she still doesn't know how to take care of her hair; her new boyfriend doesn't seem to either."

"What are you babbling about?" Harry asked.

"For a Ravenclaw, you're not very smart. She's been hanging out with that third year 'Puff, Longbottom, since before the holidays. And you're completely oblivious!"

"Sorry, Harry," Larry answered, "I don't know."

Harry ignored Cho, and thanked Larry, and headed out of the common room.

Harry collected his things from the now empty Defense classroom, and went to the Library to work on his homework. When he got back to the common room at curfew, he found Luna. Her hair was a mess. He felt guilty, because he had been too busy lately to brush it for her.

"Hello, Harry," she said, as he came up to her. He had been stewing about the situation since he left the common room earlier, and he was quite angry, now.

"Luna, where were you?" he asked, staring at the blonde. Luna heard the laughs of the fourth year girls in Cho's clique, and turned back to Harry. Observing his state, she got up, and gathered her things.

"Come, on Harry. We need to talk privately."

"Huh? Where are you going."

"Let's find an empty classroom. We don't want to have a fight here."

"What are you talking about!" he said, loudly. Luna noticed the Cho clique laughing some more. She just headed for the exit.

Harry found himself in the corridor, following Luna.

"Luna," he hissed, "it's after curfew!"

"It can't be helped," she said, taking one of the 142 stairways in the castle to the fourth level. She entered an unused classroom often used by Ravenclaws for spell practice, and sat down. Harry didn't sit.

"Where were you tonight."

"You know that I have Charms club on Thursdays. Just as you have private lessons with Professor Lupin."

"But what about Neville?"

"What about Neville?"

"Are you seeing him?"

"Of course I'm seeing him. He's in Charms club with me. I invited him so he'd have someplace to go on Hogsmeade weekends."

"But are you going out with him?"

"Don't be silly, who told you that?"

"I'm not being silly, and Cho said. . . ."

"Cho! I should have known. Harry, are you going to believe her?"

That stopped him.

"Oh, Harry, I married you. . . ."

But whatever else she was going to say was stopped by the gasp that was heard at the door. They turned and saw Penelope Clearwater, the Seventh Year prefect.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped. "You're married?"

Harry stood there, unable to come up with something to do or say.

"Technically, we're betrothed," Luna answered.

"With your cousin? How close are you?"

"More than nine degrees, not that it's any of your business."

"But only a very few purebloods arrange their children's marriages. Almost none, actually."

"Honestly, Penelope, it's no one else's business. And I would really appreciate it if you would just forget that you heard about it. You don't think we have enough problems without that, too? They don't tease us enough when Harry brushes my hair? This is no one's business but our own."

Harry finally found his voice. "Please don't tell anyone."

"Very well. But it's after curfew, and you can't be out here. I'll take you back to the tower."

"Thank you." Harry and Luna said.

As they walked back, Luna said, quietly, "I've missed you since you've been so busy."

Harry answered, quietly, "I'm sorry. I'll try to do better."

"That's all I can ask."

They entered the common room and saw Cho smirking. When they were all the way in the room, Luna asked, loudly, "Harry, would you brush my hair?"

"Of course, Luna."

Harry thought the the way the smirk disappeared from Cho's face was priceless.

- - -

"Ennervate!"

"Hello, Cissy"

Narcissa Malfoy found herself tied to a chair in her own dining room. "Trixie. I should have known. You've visited Andy and Sirius. Now it's my turn. How have you been?"

"Doing much better since I've been out of Azkaban. I've decided to leave the wizarding world all together."

"You're going to live like a Muggle?" Narcissa was astonished.

"I've already got a job, and a place to stay. I have to say I'm doing well."

"I don't believe it! You? With the Muggles?"

"I especially like the children. There are a lot of children where I work. If they get too annoying, I scare them a little, but not too much. I've grown to like my job."

"I'm glad for you. I really am."

"Thanks. Did Sirius really give you my locket?"

"Yes he did. We've become friends. And I've made up with Andy. Lucius hates it, but I don't care any more. And between Sirius, myself, and some friends his own age, we've subverted Draco. He's not going to be an arrogant creep like his father or our father. He might even marry a Muggle-born. There's one in his circle of friends that he gets along with. Of course he's too young."

"He's in Slytherin?"

"Yes. If we had started working on him earlier, he might not have been, but he has many friends in the other Houses."

"That's good. The houses were too confining. If I hadn't been in Slytherin. . . ." Her voice trailed off. "If I had been in Gryffindor would I have had enough courage to disobey our father?"

"I don't know, Trixie. Neither of us did."

"How about Jim Potter's son? He's Draco's age. Are they friends?"

"Jim?' 'Jim!' I knew it. I knew you had a crush on him!"

"So what if I did? He was even a pure-blood and would almost have been acceptable to father. But Draco and Harry Potter don't get along?"

"Harry Potter disappeared. Years ago. No one's sure what happened. Many people think he's dead."

"That's so sad. Another old family gone."

"That wasn't so important when You-Know-Who was around."

"No. And we helped wipe out a number of families. I can't forget what we did. You know there are some things that saying 'sorry' doesn't fix."

"You seem to be doing better than when you talked to Sirius and Andy. No offense, but they thought you weren't quite right after being in Azkaban for so long."

"I think I am doing better. I'm sure of it. There are things that are really enjoyable now. At first, all I wanted was to be away from the Dementors and for it to stop hurting. They had ripped so much away from me -- well, a lot of it's still gone. But it's amazing how good dinner is after a long day of working; not that the work is that strenuous, mind you. But it's nice not to be on display and let myself be silly. I'm sorry, I don't remember what we talking about?"

"You're still not all better, are you?"

"I guess not. I still have problems concentrating. And sometimes I think I'm going to just lose it and tear someone to pieces. Luckily, I have some place to go when I feel that way." She laughed. "I wonder if our Master had had a time out place if he would have turned out like he did?"

"Do you want him to come back?"

"Merlin! No! That's where the memories of pain come from. Or at least their start. He Crucio-ed me! ME! I was his best servant! But no more. He won't hurt me again. Never again. Not him, not the boy!"

"What boy, Trixie?"

"Longbottom. Neville Longbottom. He won't hurt me again, either!"

"But Neville was just a baby. He didn't hurt you?" Narcissa realized that her earlier comments on Bellatrix's mental state were totally wrong. Her sister was still crazy.

"You don't understand, Cissy. It's all broken. It's all the same. It no longer matters what end of the wand you're on, the Cruciatus feels the same. I have to stop it. Every time I curse Longbottom, I curse myself. It has to stop. That's why I have to get to him, to make it stop. You understand. I have to make it stop.

"I'm sorry things worked out this way, Cissy. But I'm glad you got your sister back."

"I want you back, too, Trixie!"

"I can't come back. They won't let me. We both know that. And I won't go back to Azkaban. They'll have to kill me first. That might be best, anyway. It was good seeing you, Cissy. I don't know that we'll see each other again."

Narcissa nodded at her sister, tears in her eyes. Bellatrix also was crying. She shuddered, and ran from the room, leaving Narcissa tied to her favorite chair. She took a deep breath to get a hold of herself, then called for Kreacher to untie her. She ran towards the kitchen of Malfoy Manor, and looked out. There was no sign of her sister. She walked slowly to the entrance hall and threw some floo powder into the fireplace.

"Auror headquarters, please. I'd like to report a sighting of Bellatrix Lestranger."

- - -

February 5th found Harry and Luna sitting together alternately rooting for the Gryffindor's Quidditch team and the Hufflepuff's. He wanted the 'Puffs to beat the Slytherins on their final match, and hoped they were getting experience this game to do so. He also had friends in Gryffindor, though, including the Weasley Twins. They had gotten a sixth year to play seeker, but in the end, even though the Gryffindor Chasers (known both as the Gryffindor Hotties and the Gryffindor Harpies) scored more points than the 'Puffs, Cedric Diggory beat them to the snitch. Hufflepuff won.

"Now, all we have to do is have Hufflepuff beat Slytherin, and we beat Gryffindor, and the Quidditch cup is ours!" Harry exclaimed to Luna as they went down the stairs.

"But you're not going to get too busy at it, are you?" Luna asked.

Liz, who was next to them, said, "You sound like my parents."

Harry and Luna laughed at that, which left Liz a bit confused.

- - -

Selene sat at her desk in the Department of Mysteries, reading reports. She tried to keep her mind on her work, but these were particularly boring. When Algie stopped by her desk, she was glad for the break.

"Selene, got a minute?"

"Of course, Algie. What's up?"

"Come to my office for a moment." She locked up everything in her desk, and walked with him past all the other desks that looked exactly like hers. A lot of the witches and wizards were reading the same reports she was. Some of them looked at her enviously, wishing they had something else to do.

When they got to Algie's office (a private one with a door) he said, "Watch this." He performed a complicated spell over Slytherin's locket. "What did you see?" he asked.

"A snake?"

"That's what I see, too."

"What does that mean?"

"Parseltongue. The spells cast on these were probably done in Parseltongue."

"But would that matter? If someone had cast the spells in Greek or Arabic, or quietly, even. Would it make any difference?"

"Actually, it would. But practically -- not really. The difference would be so small as to be non-noticeable. But if it were cast in Gobbledygook you'd notice. You'd still be able to get around or pass them, but it helps to know the language it was cast in. As far as I know, no one has ever studied the effects of a Parseltongue spell, though. So, while interesting, this may not be helpful."

"But if we had a Parseltongue speaker?"

"It's so rare that I doubt we could find anyone, and so associated with dark wizards that if there was someone out there who knew it, they probably wouldn't acknowledge it."

"How about one of the Hogwarts professors."

"One of them is a Parseltongue?"

"No, most of them. Harry and Luna taught them a spell that lets them speak Parseltongue. They learned it from a Dryad."

"You're kidding!"

"No, let's give Hogwarts a call. . . ."

- - -

"Mr. Lovegood?"

"Yes, Professor Flitwick?"

"Could you give me a few minutes of your time. That Parseltongue spell seems to have slipped my mind. I need a refresher, if you would be so kind."

"Yes, it is hard to remember. I'd be happy to help you. . . ."

- - -

"Hey, Ron! What's the problem?"

"Hi Harry, Neville, Draco. It's the Quidditch cup. With two losses, we're out of the running." The boys met on the way out of the Great Hall where they had been in the study group.

"Yes, but at least with that McLaggen off your team you did a lot better," Harry said, trying to cheer him up.

"He's been off for a year, and we still have to find a Seeker."

Neville put in, "Can't help you, but maybe you need to force everyone in the House, except McLaggen, to try out."

"I suppose."

Harry said, "Hey, cheer up. It's only a game."

"Harry, are you crazy? It's not a game. It's Quidditch!"

A few minutes later, in the Entrance Hall, Harry was saying goodnight to Neville and Draco.

"I don't think Ron has his priorities right," Harry said.

"Ron's not so bad," Draco said. "Hermione said something once about 'getting killed, or worse, getting expelled.'" They laughed at that, and went their separate ways.

- - -

"Professor! I can feel them!"

"Don't worry, Harry. They're outside the boundary of Hogwarts. The Headmaster assures me that they can't cross the wards. However, that doesn't mean we can't feel them, as you found out. This is about as far away from the Dementors as we can be, and still be affected. Why don't you try now."

Harry and Professor Lupin were near the gates of Hogwarts to give Harry practice with the Patronus charm with Dementors around.

"Expecto Patronum!"

"Alright Harry, lets move a bit farther away, and try again."

"But if I can't do it now, when we're barely affected, what would it be like if I were in a situation where I had to cast this?"

"Don't worry so much about the future. You have this problem to solve now. Try again, and really concentrate on your happy memory."

After several more tries, Harry was able to produce a little silver mist.

"Very good, Harry. We'll come back next week and try again. You're making progress."

"It's like I'm learning it all over again."

"You're learning to cast it under the influence of the Dementors. You have the spell, but now you have to overcome the Dementors' effects. That is, indeed, something new you have to learn."

- - -

"Hey, Luna!"

"Hi Ginny."

They were in the Great Hall. The group had just finished going over the material they thought relevant to the History of Magic essay on the development of wards spurred by the popularity of the game Quidditch. It seems that wards, which hadn't had any advancements in centuries, had to be modified, enhanced, and researched to meet the needs of the new game. It brought about a period of spell development that lasted about fifty years, then stopped. Several of the students were noticing that that was a recurring event in the History of Magic. Periods of spell advancement followed by periods without. Tumulty attributed it to the "basic, inherent, laziness of the

average witch and wizard." Some students wondered whether that was true Cough-Gryffindor-cough. After the joking died down, most of the students at the second year table, which tonight was the Gryffindor table, started writing their essay or talking quietly among themselves about aspects of it that they didn't feel the need to share with the whole group.

Ginny asked, "You look deep in thought. Thought of something new for Tumulty's homework?"

"No. Trying to figure a way around some magic. If you knew that there's an unnoticeable object somewhere, but can't see it because it's unnoticeable, how do you get it?"

"Didn't Flitwick say that the unnoticeable charm eventually fades? Just wait and it goes away."

"That's true, but I think that the charm is probably renewed every so often, so that doesn't help."

"You're not trying to steal someone's stuff, are you?" The whole subject of the Unnoticeable Spell had come up in Charms earlier in the year when Margo Lane had complained about someone stealing some of her stuff from her dorm. The caster could see the object, but everyone else would avoid it. It helped Margo until someone cast Unnoticeability on her bed and she had to get Professor Snape involved. She shuddered when telling the story during a study group session. Snape was still acting in class as he had at the end of the previous year, and people felt they were actually learning from him. But he still had an unpleasant demeanor.

"No. Trying to help someone, and I think they're being affected by the object."

"Not another dark object that's going to blow up the school!"

Several other students heard that, and stopped their discussions of their homework, and started paying attention to Luna and Ginny. Luna acted as if they weren't there.

"No, nothing like that. I think it's a prank, and don't want the prankster or the prank-ee to know. Is that even a word, 'prank-ee?'"

"You should talk to my brothers. If anyone knows pranks, it's them."

"Thanks, I will."

- - -

"Excellent, Harry! You've now got both back legs transfigured."

"Remus, this is so weird. And I get the strangest feelings where the animal legs attach to my body. I doubt I could walk, now."

They were in Professor Lupin's office, practicing Harry's Animagus transformation. He was lying on the floor, on his side, sort of curled, so he could look at his animal legs.

"No, I doubt you could. Your hips aren't designed for those legs. You'll have to transform them before you could walk."

"Yes, but I probably still couldn't walk, because a rhino is four footed, not upright."

"True. Now try to revert back. Once we get this done, I think we should go back to your right hand. You're going to have to transform that eventually."

"I know. I'm just worried that I still won't be able to change it."

"Nothing succeeds like success. After getting both your legs, I think you'll be able to do that hand. You're doing so well. It took your father several years to get it all done, and you've managed almost a quarter of the transforms in less than a year."

"How long did it take you?"

"I'm not an Animagus. I can't transform at will like you'll be able to."

"But Luna saw the animal magic in your aura."

"That was something else, Harry. Now lets get back to you. Try to change your legs as quickly as possible. . . ."

- - -

"Professor Flitwick, how nice of you to join us."

"Thank you for inviting me, Mrs. Lovegood. I'm always happy to help the Department of Mysteries. Not that I've ever been asked before, of course."

"Please, call me Selene."

"Only if you call me Filius. You're not my student any more. Now, how may I help you."

"We're trying to de-enchant an object, and we discovered that the protective spells on it were cast in Parseltongue. That's going to make it harder to remove them unless we counter them in the same language."

"Of course. Well, shall we get started?"

- - -

"Fred, George, got a minute?"

"For you, Luna. . ."

"Always. What can we. . ."

"Do for you?"

They were entering the castle after Quidditch practice. The match against Hufflepuff was over a month away, but both teams were practicing hard. Gryffindor so it wouldn't have a year of three losses, and Ravenclaw because if Hufflepuff beat Slytherin, they had a shot at the Quidditch cup.

"If someone had been pranked with an unnoticeable object, is there any way to find it?"

"Do we tell her?" George asked.

"I don't know. It's giving away secrets of the trade."

"True. Pranking is a noble profession, and we don't want just anyone knowing the deep secrets."

"But she did give us a new idea."

"True, brother. Unnoticeable pranks objects. There's possibilities there."

"Exactly. Everything from an unnoticeable bucket of water over a door. . . ."

"To an unnoticeable dung bomb in the middle of a classroom."

"Very well, we'll let you in on a secret. You need to talk to Colin."

"His very interesting Muggle Camera doesn't seem affected by the Unnoticeable Charm."

"We discovered it one day when he had taken some pictures in the courtyard."

"You've noticed how sometimes classrooms move around. . . ."

"But you never notice it happening?"

"Well, he got two pictures that showed a window moving on the castle."

"Strangest thing you've ever seen. . . ."

"Or maybe not, you've seen our brother Percy. . . ."

"And, while there may be other ways of getting around it. . . ."

"That may be the easiest."

"Thanks, Fred. Thanks, George!"

"How does she do it?"

"I don't know. Half the time, I'm not sure if you're George or Fred, and I've known you all my life."

- - -

Mike Daly got everyone's attention at the second year table in the Great Hall (which was the door end of the Slytherin table that night). "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we have one more item of business to take care of, then we can get back to the Potions essay. As today is Saint Benedict's day, I thought we should take a moment to celebrate!"

As he said the pre-arranged codeword, a cake appeared in front of him. Or, as Harry and Luna were sitting right across from him, it could be said to have appeared in front of them. There were thirteen burning candles, and Mike read what was written on the cake.

"Happy Birthday, Luna."

There was some applause, and a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday" was sung. Luna blew out the candles to more applause, and a couple of house elves appeared and started serving the cake to everyone who wanted some.

Luna turned to Harry and thanked him, and whispered that she needed to see him privately after the meeting/party.

Later, on their way back to Ravenclaw tower, Luna led Harry into an empty classroom.

"What did you want to talk to me about, Luna?" he asked.

"I just wanted to thank you for the party, and the nice gift."

"You're welcome."

"I haven't thanked you yet."

"Huh?"

She had him put down his bookbag, hugged him close, took his head in both hands, and kissed him hard on the mouth. After a moments confusion, Harry started kissing back. After a little while they broke the kiss.

"Wow!" Harry said. "Why weren't any of our kisses before like that?"

"I don't know. Maybe we were too young. But we can't do that in the common room. That's for private."

"Yeah," Harry sighed, with a glassy look.

"We should go up now. Or we'll be late."

"Yeah."

"Also, Colin said that he finished the roll of film, and the pictures of the Divination classroom should be back in about a week."

"Yeah."

"Harry!"

"What? Pictures. Yes. Good."

"Time to go, Harry."

- - -

"Filius!"

"Good morning, Headmaster."

"Are you still doing that job for the Department of Mysteries?"

"Yes I am."

"Why did they need someone who can speak Parseltongue?"

"I'm sorry, Albus, but I can't tell you. Secrecy oath and all that."

"What would they have done if you didn't know the Parseltongue spell?"

"Hired the Lovegood children?" he answered with a smile.

"Yes, that might be true. Of course, I wouldn't put it past the Weasley Twins going out and learning Parseltongue if it would help them with a prank."

"Uh, they might have attended one of the Parseltongue classes given last year."

"Oh dear! Well, lets keep the pranking potential of what they know as quiet as possible."

"Indeed, Albus. Indeed!"

- - -

April came and the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs fought in the air for honor, fame, and house pride. Or just because it was fun to play, and fun for everyone else to cheer. Harry watched with the other Ravenclaw Quidditch team while their chance of winning the Quidditch cup disintegrated as the Slytherins bullied their way to a win. It could have gone either way until the snitch was sighted closer to Draco. Harry was happy for his friend as he didn't make any mistakes and caught the snitch, guaranteeing the cup went to Slytherin this year. He wasn't stupid, though, and didn't cheer when Draco caught the little golden ball.

The next practice found members of the team acting halfhearted. Someone, Harry wasn't sure who, even went so far as to ask what the point was.

Harry piped up, "The point is to have fun. As my uncle Larry always says, if you can't have fun while losing, don't play the game, because you're not always going to win."

Roger picked it up the point, "Exactly. Sure it's fun to win, but the real reason we're here is because Quidditch is fun!"

Eddie Carmichael added, "And it's a great way to get to meet girls." Lynn Chambers grabbed the Quaffle and threw it at him with a laugh. Roger said, "Hormonal reasons aside, we still have the Gryff's to beat, so let's get flying!"

During practice, Roger flew to Harry. "You're the starting Seeker, Harry. Work hard or I'll give it back to Cho."

"I'll do my best."

"That's what I'm asking for."

- - -

Kingsley Shacklebolt sat in his office, the Lestrage file spread out all over his desk. At the top of the pile was Mrs. Malfoy's interview. Unlike Tonks, they had given Narcissa Veritaserum. It seems she was telling the truth. Her son really was a friend of Neville Longbottom, and she really didn't want him harmed.

The most disturbing thing was that all three witnesses said that Bellatrix was probably insane. At times she was lucid, and other times she rambled, saying things that didn't make sense.

His problem was you couldn't out-think a crazy person. Their thought process could add two and two and come up with five or three.

Any sane person would avoid Hogwarts. With the Dementors around it she should wait for either the train ride, the train station, or when Neville was back at home. Personally, Kingsley leaned towards the

last one. That was where she was captured. That would probably be the most satisfying location for revenge. But if she wasn't casting with a working wand. . . .

The train was almost ignorable. It was warded five ways from Sunday, and they would have the Dementors search it before the students got on it. Once it was going there was no way to get on. Too much magic protected it.

The station? He had a very bad feeling about that. Both of Lestrage's sisters said that Lestrage indicated that she wasn't going back to Azkaban. If she was going for some sort of suicide/revenge it would be almost impossible to stop her from harming a lot of people at platform Nine and Three Quarters.

Another confusing aspect of this was the comment about her job and a place to stay. After the "attack" on Mrs. Malfoy they had published her picture again among the Muggles. It was hard to believe that someone would protect her, given the write up the Ministry had published in the Muggle press.

But her comments on her job were disturbing, too. If she had just said she had a job, he would have guessed a certain illegal activity. But she mentioned working with children, and having dinner after a long day of working. That didn't sound like a night job.

He came to a conclusion. They would have Longbottom leave the school by Floo, and publicize that fact. That would at least make the likelihood of an attack on platform Nine and Three Quarters become almost nil.

Still, Bellatrix Lestrage was crazy, and you couldn't always tell what a crazy person was going to do.

- - -

"Filius, I must say, this was harder than we ever expected," Selene said.

She, Algie, and Professor Flitwick were in one of the shielded workrooms of the Department of Mysteries. The Hufflepuff cup and Slytherin locket were sitting on the granite topped table in front of them.

"Whoever enchanted those things certainly wanted them protected. Now what are you going to do with them? These are quite unique items. You don't see golden cups and lockets every day. From the image on this, I'd say it belonged to someone from Hufflepuff house. And this one, definitely a Slytherin student."

Algie answered the question, "Sorry Filius, but we have to destroy them. All you've done is remove the protective spells. What's left is the blackest of dark magic."

"Such a shame, they really are beautiful. Oh, well."

"Would you be available to do this in the future?"

"I should be."

"We think there's one or two more of these objects out there. With luck we'll collect them this summer, and you'll get to do this all over again."

"Oh joy. But to be honest, the second one was easier than the first. Hopefully, we can breeze through any more you find."

"Your Ministry thanks you for your assistance, Filius."

"Always my pleasure, Algie, Selene."

The two Unspeakables watched Selene's former professor leave the area.

"How were you going to destroy them?" Selene asked.

"I was going to melt them down."

"Simple."

"And hopefully effective."

- - -

"Harry! Get to bed! It's our final game tomorrow!"

"This will take just a few minutes, Roger."

"It's OK Harry, if you don't do my hair tonight."

"No, Luna, it's not OK. I let Quidditch interfere with us earlier in the year, and I'm not about to make the same mistake again. Besides, if I didn't do your hair, I'd spend half the night worrying about Bollywoggles snarling it even worse."

"You're sweet."

Harry finished brushing Luna's hair. She turned around, and her wide, silvery eyes widened even farther, as she took in a quick breath. Harry turned behind him, whipping out his wand.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he asked, looking for whatever Luna had seen. She had been doing better most of the term; she hardly ever mentioned animals that no one else knew about. He turned back to her. She was smiling now. If it wasn't so unlike anything Luna would do, he'd think he was the victim of a prank.

"I'll tell you in the morning. It's good news, so don't worry."

"Alright, but I'll hold you to that."

"Good night Harry. I love you."

"Good night Luna. I love you, too." They shared a chaste kiss, and went to bed.

The next morning Harry met Luna in the common room, and headed to breakfast.

"Well?" Harry asked as they walked down through the castle.

"We need someplace private."

"How's in here?"

"Perfect! Harry, Mum's succeeded!" She gently touched his forehead. "Two more lines are gone. The darkness is smaller. Just two more to go."

Harry put his Fireball down, and hugged Luna tightly. They shared one of their "special", private kisses.

Luna soon pulled back, and said, "Now you have to get some breakfast, and go catch a snitch!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Harry almost shouted. And that's what he did. The teams seemed evenly matched, and both the Ravenclaw and the Gryffindor Chasers played well. The Gryffindor team played Ginny Weasley in the Seeker position. Unfortunately, she didn't have the broom (she was on a school broom) or the practice (she had only been on the team three weeks). Harry saw the snitch first and quickly caught it.

- - -

"Jo!"

"Goodnight Bob! It's Saturday. I wasn't supposed to be working today. I'm not staying late. Goodnight Bob."

"You better see this before you leave."

"Goodnight Bob. See you Monday."

"Jo. . . ."

"Goodnight Bob."

"It's Warriorette."

"What happened."

"Drat. I was hoping you would just explain it, and then you could go home. Come on. I better show you."

They entered the Big Cat building and Jo read the sign on the mysterious jaguar's cage.

Temporarily off exhibit.

- - - - -

Author Note: Bollywoggles and their hair snarling propensity came from Michelle-31a, used with permission.

Bobmin (Bob and Alex) used a vase with the unnoticeable charm on it in their wonderful Sunrise Over Britian. While I wrote that part before they published their story (just ask my beta's :-) I thought I should point out where it was shown first.

And last, but not least, I want to thank my beta-readers, Kaetie and Meg who have had a lot happen in their lives over the last two months, and still found some time to help me. The file I gave them for this chapter was a lot bigger, so look for the next chapter soon, as it was once one big one.

Chapter 14

The Prisoner of Hogwarts

Luna whispered, "Harry, wake up."

"Huh? What?"

"Shhhh! You don't have to wake everyone."

It was Sunday morning and they had been up pretty late last night celebrating their Quidditch victory.

"If you don't want to wake anyone up, what are you doing to me?"

"We have to do something before someone wakes up. If you promise to get up and get dressed, I'll leave you alone. Otherwise, I'll be back in two minutes. Get up."

Harry got up, and groggily got dressed. He left the dorm room and met Luna in the common room.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I got the picture from Collin. Look." She handed him a Muggle photograph of the fireplace in the Divination classroom.

"There's a vase in the middle of the mantle."

"Yes. We need to get it, even though we ignore it when we're in it's presence."

"How do we do that?"

"I think we just try very hard. Let's get up there."

They left the Ravenclaw tower, and made their way to the Divination tower.

"Why are we doing this so early?" Harry asked, on the way over.

"We don't want Aunt Sibyll to see what we're doing until we're done. Unless someone suggests it, she probably won't think to leave the tower."

"What makes you say that?"

"I owed Mum. She says long term exposure to these sorts of compulsions can become habit forming, and live on after the magical compulsion is gone. She wants us to try to get rid of the vase as soon as possible, then we're to invite Aunt Sibyll to the house just before we leave."

"Did she have any idea why Aunt Sibyll is being kept locked in a tower?"

"As a matter of fact, she did. She said she had a number of ideas why, but that most have already been used in fairy tales, and didn't think her captor would be so derivative." They had, by unspoken agreement, decided to not mention Aunt Sibyll's jailer by name.

"Figures. She has guesses and didn't want us to know."

"She is an Unspeakable. Being quiet about her work is part of her job."

"But this is family, not her job."

"Don't get upset. She wrote that she'd talk to us about it after we got home. Aunt Sibyll! Let us up!" The last was spoken at the ceiling of the room below the Divination classroom. The ladder came down.

"I asked her to key us into the ladder so we could come visit. Be quiet when we get up there, though."

They climbed into the Divination classroom and checked out the mantle again.

"It should be right here!" Luna said, looking at the picture in her hand, and reaching for the mantle where the vase should be.

"I felt all across there, and didn't feel it. Or didn't notice it. How do you find something you can't notice? I moved my hand all across the mantle and didn't notice when I moved it out of the way. What would happen if you moved your hand across it, and I held your hand. You wouldn't notice moving your hand out of the way, but maybe I would."

"It's worth a try," Luna replied. They stood close to each other, Luna's hand over the mantle, Harry's hand against hers, palm to the back of her hand. They started to move slowly over the mantle.

Suddenly, Harry said, "Wait! You're moving your hand up. Push it gently back into my palm, and I'll move your hand forward."

They did so, and Harry felt a change in the pressure against his palm as he pushed Luna's hand across the space above the marble shelf.

"OK, I think you're touching it."

"I still don't notice anything. This is a very powerful spell. I asked Liz Ragingstorm, the prefect, to cast an unnoticeable charm on a book. If I knew what I was looking for, and where it was, I found I could notice it. But this charm is resisting everything."

"Yes. Now that we know where it is, what do we do with it?"

"Wait!" Luna said. She moved her hand away from Harry's and grabbed a folded scarf from the mantle. She unfolded it, and tossed it over the spot where the vase was hiding.

"I figured, if you could notice my hand when it encountered the vase, we could notice the scarf when it covered it." She wrapped the vase tightly in the scarf. "And we now can touch the scarf without touching the vase, which we wouldn't notice. All in all, a good mornings work!"

As they went down the ladder, Harry asked again, "But why did we need to do this so early in the morning?"

"Because every time we've visited Aunt Sibyll in the evening, I've noticed she'd been drinking. Mum thinks that's because she can't go

anywhere or do anything, but what it means to us is early in the morning she'll still be sleeping it off."

"OK, but speaking of sleeping. . . ."

"Fine. You can go back to bed. I need to send a package to Mum. I think she'd like a vase, at least to examine."

"Good idea."

"And you probably would have thought of it if you weren't always thinking about Quidditch."

"Well, that's over for the school year. I'll try not to get so wrapped up in it next year."

Luna answered in a dreamy voice, "You won't be playing next year. No one will."

"What? What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. I just know it."

Harry was noticing when Luna said things like that, that they were usually true. "If that's the case, then we should have lots of time together, because I'm almost done with my Patronus lessons, and hopefully I'll finish the Animagus lessons this summer. I'm still having trouble with my right arm. But about my Patronus! You'll never guess what it is!"

"What?"

"What's going on here!"

They were being accosted by Argus Filch and Miss Norris.

Luna leaned over and stuck out her hand towards Miss Norris. "Awww, what a cute kitty!" Miss Norris hissed and backed away.

Harry said, "We were just taking a morning stroll. We wanted to have some private conversation before we went to breakfast."

Filch was not paying attention. "What are you doing? You leave my cat alone!"

"But she's such a sweet little kitty!" She advanced on Miss Norris, who bolted and ran.

"What did you do to my cat?"

"All I wanted to do was pet her."

"You leave my cat alone! Do you hear!" Filch stomped off in the direction that Miss Norris was going.

"Poor thing. Think that she's suffering a case of Kittipicks."

"What are Kittipicks?"

"Tic-like bugs that cause nervousness to the cats they attack. A good tomato juice bath would clean them up."

"Somehow, I don't see Miss Norris, or any cat for that matter, putting up with a tomato juice bath. From what I've heard about cats and baths, they just don't go together."

"Well, sometimes you just have to do things for the good of others."

"Is that why Sibyll was locked up? Someone thought it was for her own good?"

"That's a whole lot different, Harry. Sibyll, unlike a cat, can make up her own mind, and can decide what her own good is. Now, if society had locked her up, that would be a different story. But it's not what's going on here."

"No, it's not. Let's get back to the tower, get that wrapped up for mailing, then get to breakfast."

"I thought you wanted to sleep?"

"Not after meeting Mr. Filch. I think he frightened me awake."

- - -

The jaguar watched the children going from the greenhouses towards the castle entrance. Earlier, she had watched other children going from the Care of Magical Creatures class near the ground keeper's hut. She was fairly invisible in the tree near the castle entrance. She had been stalking this spot for several days. It wouldn't be long now.

- - -

"We got a package from the kids."

"Oh, what is it."

"There's a letter here. Hang on. . . . "

"I'll flay him alive!"

"Dear, 'Defeater of Grindelwald,' 'Head of the Wizengamot.' remember? How about, 'Most powerful wizard in our times'? Any of this ring a bell?" Selene said, trying to calm her husband down. She was trying to find the vase, which she had put on the kitchen table after taking it out of the package, and reading the letter to Larry. She knew it was here, she just couldn't notice it.

"I'll use the power of the Press!"

"Not to make too big a point of it, but most witches and wizards don't take the Quibbler seriously."

"Then what?"

"First, we get your sister away from Hogwarts. If she's been under a compulsion keeping her there for so long, she probably isn't even thinking of leaving, so I'm having the children invite her here, and, for

the first time since Luna's second birthday, she should be able to make it. Then we keep her from Dumbledore."

"But why would he keep her locked up? That doesn't make any sense. Unless. . . . Naw, he's three or four times her age. He wouldn't, would he? I love my sister, but, to be honest, she's not much of a looker, if you know what I mean."

"Neither are you dear. You know it's what's inside that's important. And, no. I don't think Dumbledore would keep her locked up for that. But why would he? What would Sibyll have that Dumbledore wants to keep." She was patting the table with her hands.

"Her cough gift cough."

"But she's never really shown much of a gift, has she?"

"Only that one time, at Luna's birthday party. I mean, she made all those other predictions, but that one in that strange voice. . . ."

"Yes, and you were very clever to decipher it and stop Luna from following that swift off the cliff. So maybe she's an Oracle. If so, that still doesn't explain why Dumbledore would keep her locked up." She was clearing the table of everything, even things that usually stayed there, like the salt and pepper shaker.

"Maybe she gave him an important prophesy, and he wants to keep it secret."

Selene thought for a moment. "That we can check up on. But until she's here, we might not know for sure. I'll write the kids." She was wiping the table with the washcloth. It had to be here -- somewhere!

Larry nodded, and said, "Give them my love."

"I will. And I'll have to ask them how to find that vase. I seem to have misplaced it."

- - -

"As Professor Lupin isn't feeling well, I will once again be teaching this class. According to his notes you are supposed to be learning the counter for the knee-reversal hex." Harry wished Remus wasn't ill so much. He was a much better teacher than Snape.

- - -

Remus slipped out of the castle. The sun was still well up, so there was no need to hurry. He made his way to the Whomping Willow, and kept looking around. He couldn't get over the feeling that he was being watched.

- - -

Warriorette watched from the bushes as the man poked the Willow with a long stick. Then he disappeared into a hole among the roots. She watched for half an hour, then ran to the opening. The Willow was dangerous, but it was a plant, and, in truth, except for the Venus Man Trap no plant could really move faster than most mammals. And she was a fast mammal. The tunnel was long, dirty, and dank, but eventually reached an end beneath a trap door. She listened and found that the man was probably in a chair about two meters to the right of the trap door. She changed back and cast a silencing spell on the ladder and the trap door. She still moved as quietly as possible up the steps. Wand ready, she knocked the trap door open, and stunned the man.

He had been sitting in a stuffed chair, reading, an empty potion bottle on a table next to him. She tied him up, and looked over the building. She nodded, this would do. She made sure that his wand wasn't anywhere near him. She tested it, but it was actually a worse fit for her compared to the stolen wand she was using. Oh, well.

She headed down the ladder, leaving the trap door open. This would be a good place for the final confrontation with the Longbottom boy.

- - -

The "new, improved" Snape finished up the Defense Against the Dark Arts class. His students no longer were subjected to arbitrary, verbal

assaults, but without that overriding fear, his failure as an instructor was more apparent. Harry mentally made note of which students he would be tutoring tonight in the study group. It seemed that Remus was ill about once a month. He hoped it wasn't anything serious. His mind slipped in a Sirius joke, and he almost groaned out loud.

The class finally ended, and Luna took his hand and dragged him out of the room.

"What's up?"

"I don't know, but something seems wrong. Lets put our things away, and go for a walk. We still have two hours until dinner."

"Alright."

They headed out and wandered around the grounds for a while until they heard the shouting.

- - -

Hannah Abbot and Susan Bones hung up their smocks as Double Herbology with the Gryffindors finished up. They were chatting with Neville about the African Stranglers that they had been feeding today. Parts of it could be harvested for poison antidotes. Other parts, Neville explained moving his hand quickly away from the mouth, were ingredients for poisons. But the main use was for certain muscle repair potions. Hannah and Susan, unbeknownst to Neville, had been spending a lot of free time talking about him. They were analyzing all the boys in their year, and felt that Neville might make a good boyfriend. They'd worry about whose boyfriend when the time came. Meanwhile, they knew that he could be enthusiastic and articulate, at least when talking about plants.

It was their last class of the day, and they had an hour before dinner would start. It was a beautiful day in May and many of the students were in no hurry to go inside. Neville, Hanna, and Susan walked slowly towards the castle, still talking. The girls had moved the conversation from plants to his home, and he was still enthusiastic

and articulate as he talked about the manor and the lands around it. Hannah looked at Susan, and Susan looked at Hannah, and nodded.

"What do you think of the various girls in our year, Neville?" Hannah asked.

Neville was suddenly no longer articulate or enthusiastic but stuttering and tongue tied. Upon reflection later, it may have been caused by the surprise of a 100 kilo black cat running through the students, knocking them down, snarling, and biting. It leaped at the three of them, and the girls screamed. Neville pushed them away, and reached for his wand, but the beast knocked him down, too. It grabbed his leg in its mouth and started dragging him away. His leg was one mass of pain, but he still had his wand in his hand. He tried to bring it to bear on the black jaguar, but as he did it let go of his leg, and leaped at his arm. A clawed paw came down on his arm, and he lost hold of the wand as his arm broke. The animal leaped at Hannah and Susan, who were getting up and trying to get their wands out. It nipped their wand arms and they screamed and ran. Another group of students, Gryffindors, started throwing spells at her, but she dodged and scattered them. Some she bit on the arm, others she raked with her claws, lightly.

She raced back to Neville who was cradling his arm. She again grabbed him by the leg, and dragged him to the Willow.

Luna and Harry saw Neville being dragged to the Willow, but couldn't see where they went. They got to it, and avoided a swinging branch. They stepped back.

"We should go get help," Harry said.

"No, they're going to get help," Luna replied, pointing to the students running for the castle. "We have to help Neville."

"But where is he?"

"They disappeared near the trunk, so I think we have to run in there. Wait until the tree calms down. There, it's relaxing. Too bad Willow the Dryad isn't here. I'm sure she could calm the tree down."

"It's still swaying. I don't think we can wait any longer. Let's make a run for it."

"Alright."

Luna took Harry's hand, and they ran to the base of the tree. The branches started their movements towards them, but they found the opening before the branch got near them. They slid underground and looked down the dark tunnel.

"That's scary," Harry commented.

"It's only a tunnel." She started walking, still holding Harry's hand.

"Lumos!" he incanted, lighting up the tunnel. They started walking.

Inside the castle, the Entrance Hall was chaos as several teachers tried to get coherent stories from too many children who were helpfully recounting what had happened. Unfortunately, they were all trying to do it at the same time, so the signal to noise ratio was skewed towards noise.

Professor Snape had picked up "animal attack" and sent several bit children to the infirmary already. He was having trouble keeping his anger in check. Some of the wounds were just claw marks, but some were definitely bites. He counted four more werewolves so far. But he would make sure that there would be one less werewolf shortly. He headed for the door.

Hannah and Susan were the last to reach the castle. They encountered Snape right at the door.

"Professor! Some animal got Neville!" Susan said.

"It dragged him away!"

"Where?" Snape asked.

"I think it was towards the Whomping Willow," Hannah answered.

"I'll try to save him."

"It was like a black tiger or something."

"It was a werewolf," Snape replied, stalking away with his robe billowing behind him.

"A werewolf?" Susan gasped.

"No. It was a big cat, a black lion, or tiger or something," Hannah replied.

"Wonder why he thought it was a werewolf?"

"It is a full moon tonight."

"But there's no way that was a werewolf. Is there such a thing as a weretiger? Or wereleopard?" Susan watched as Snape stalked across the lawn and disappeared around the corner of the castle.

"I don't know, but I hope not," Hannah answered, looking at the bite marks on her arm. "But that was no wolf."

At that point, Professor Flitwick came up to them and seeing the bites sent them to Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing.

- - -

"There's something strange about this," Harry said.

"What? A secret escape tunnel from the school?"

"Well, that too. But if it were an escape tunnel, why didn't go all the way into the school? But what I was thinking is that we're walking pretty quickly and we have a light. Why haven't we caught up to the animal? It was dragging someone."

"Neville."

"It was dragging Neville? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Alright, it was dragging Neville. Why haven't we caught up to it?"

"We'll know soon."

- - -

In the building that she didn't know was the Shrieking Shack, Bellatrix Lestrange lifted Neville through the trap door. He had passed out shortly after entering the tunnel, and she had turned back into a human. Using a feather-lightspell and a conjured lamp, she had quickly carried him through the tunnel. She transformed the chair into a bed and moved Neville on it. She cast some healing spells on his leg and conjured a splint for his arm. She woke Neville up with an Ennervate. He looked at her and his eyes grew wide as he realized that he was captured by the woman who had tortured his parents insane. It was true, she had escaped to finish the job. He looked around, and saw Professor Lupin tied up in a corner. His arm and leg still hurt, but appeared to have been treated. He wondered how that happened. That's when he noticed the movement.

Later, he figured that it was a change in the light near the trap door as Harry's Lumos spell came close. But he knew someone else was coming and he might get rescued.

He saw Harry pop his head up through the trap door and take a quick look around. Harry slowly moved his wand to aim at the woman who appeared to be threatening Neville. He hesitated and looked around the mostly bare, mostly trashed room, searching for the animal he had seen dragging Neville.

Bellatrix was an excellent fighter and her instincts were still true even after years in Azkaban. She knew something was happening behind her. She stared at Neville's face intently. The moment she saw the change in his expression she dodged, spun, cast "Expelliarmus" and caught Harry's wand before he had uttered his spell. He was thrown back, and fell down the ladder. She was at the trap door in a flash,

and used the Incarcerous spell to tie up both bodies she found at the bottom of the steps. She floated them both up, and placed them on the floor, out of the way. She turned back to Neville.

Neville was shocked. His hope for rescue had turned out to be two second years, who had been tied up and cast aside as if they weren't worth thinking about. Lestrangle turned back to him, and he knew it was the end. He had reached the point where he had nothing to lose.

"Are you here to kill me, Lestrangle? To finish what you didn't do when I was a baby?"

"Kill you? Why would I do that? I came to finish this. It's always the same. First it's you, then it's him, and then it's me. He's gone. I can't do anything about him. That leaves you. I have to. . . ." She stopped and looked lost. Her words confirmed to Neville that he was dead.

Bellatrix was confused. She had been planning this for months. She was going to get the Longbottom boy somewhere and then stop the cycle that began with her using the Cruciatus on him, then Voldemort using it on her, and finally her using it on herself. The endless cycle that the Dementors caused her to re-live. But now that she was here, she had no idea how to carry out the plan.

She looked around, and saw the other two children, tied up. She recognized the boy. She couldn't believe it.

"What is he doing here?" She didn't realize it, but she had spoken out loud.

"He came to rescue me. Are you going to kill him, too?" Neville answered.

"Ennervate," she said as she woke up Harry and Luna. "No one's going to die. No more. Especially, not you, and especially not him." Harry recognized Bellatrix from her pictures released by the Ministry. He had no idea what was going on, though. Why was she staring at him like that?

Neville noticed that she hadn't even turned to answer him. There were three wands on the table near the bed, Harry, Luna's and one that was there when he woke up. If he could reach one of them. . . . He jumped off the bed, and yelled in pain as his leg refused to hold him up.

Bellatrix spun and did something totally unexpected. Her eyes widened and she screamed. It wasn't a scream of rage, which Neville thought he might have caused her. It was a scream of pain. She started to shake, but got control of herself. She floated Neville back to the bed, and cast a numbing spell on his leg.

"Don't do that!" she hissed at him. "It hurts! Don't hurt yourself, again!" she said, angrily.

"What do you care! You used the Cruciatus on me! You used it on my parents until they were insane!"

"No I didn't! Your parents have a Colligpsych spell on them. I just wanted to stop the dream. . . ." She turned away from him, and looked at Harry again.

"Jim! Did Snape make all your hair fall out again?" She walked over to him, and gently touched his crew cut hair. "And he changed the color. I'll make sure he doesn't do that again. Don't worry."

Again, she spun and cast "Expelliarmus" at the trap door, where Snape was poking his head and wand through. He tried to duck, but the range was too small, and the spell too quick. She had his wand, and he was in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the ladder. She tied him up, and floated him into the room. When she got a look at him, her mood changed again.

"Ennervate! Leviosa! What did you do to his hair this time! And don't try to blame it on Sirius!"

As she spoke, she was magically slamming Snape into the wall. In those two sentences, she had hit his head against the wall about five times. She stopped levitating him, and he slumped to the floor.

Another change came over Bellatrix. She turned back to Harry, and said, tenderly, "I'm sorry, Jim. I'm sorry we never got to know each other better. I always fancied you, you know." She leaned in and kissed a very surprised Harry on the lips.

Luna spoke up, then. "Something's happening. Something not good." Harry turned away from Bellatrix' kiss, and looked at her.

"You're right. It's getting colder. It's the Dementors!"

"NOOOOOOOO!" Bellatrix yelled. Neville's eyes widened, and she stepped away from Harry. She pointed her wand at a boarded up window, and yelled "Reducto!" The explosive curse blew the boards out of the window, which showed a crowd of Dementors gathering outside.

"No. No. No. No." Bellatrix kept repeating, over and over.

"Bella, let us out," Luna asked.

"DON'T CALL ME THAT!" the black haired woman yelled, brandishing her wand.

"Then what may I call you? I'm Luna."

"Luna," Harry asked, quietly, "is this really the time for introductions?"

Once again, Lestrage's demeanor had changed totally. She was no longer upset, but totally calm. "Hello, Luna, I'm Bellatrix, but my friends call me Trixie. I'm in Slytherin house."

"I'm in Ravenclaw. Trixie, could you let us out before the Dementors get us, please?"

"Of course. Finite." The ropes disappeared from Luna and Harry, Harry walked to the table, and carefully picked up his and Luna's wands.

The room was rapidly cooling off. Unfortunately, that changed Bellatrix' personality again. She looked around quickly. "I won't go

back!" she shouted. The Dementors were moving towards the window.

"Ennervate," Harry cast the spell on Remus, then Snape, and they started waking up.

"We have to save Longbottom!" Bellatrix yelled. She tossed Remus his wand.

She turned to yell out the window, "I'm not going back!" and cast some spells that had no effect on the Dementors.

Remus pointed his wand at her, and said, "Stupefy!"

Once again, proving how dangerous a foe she was, she dodged, and cast the disarming spell on Remus.

"If you try that again, I'll stun you and leave you for them! Don't make me do that!"

Holding Remus' wand in one hand, she said, "Mobilicorpus!" Neville gave out a squeak as he was suddenly floating. She directed him with the wand through the trap door. Luna was trying to get a groggy Snape to go the same way. He had been woken up, but he still had a concussion and was disoriented.

"Go! Go! Unless you want them to get you!" Lestrangle handed Harry the wand that was controlling the spell floating Neville. Remus took Snape from Luna, and got the Potions Master to follow Harry down the stairs.

"We need to go!" Luna said.

"Yes, and we have to go now!" A Dementor had climbed most of the way through the window. Luna half climbed, half jumped down the ladder. Bellatrix was right behind her.

Harry kept the wand on Neville and tried to make it move as fast as possible, but it wouldn't go any faster than a walk. When he realized that, he didn't wait for the others, knowing they could catch up easily.

He had moved from the bottom of the ladder, trying to get as much distance between them and the Dementors as quickly as possible. He kept an eye on the ladder, though, and saw Snape, Remus, and finally Luna and Lestrangle get into the tunnel. The women soon caught up with Snape and Remus, and were rapidly catching up with Harry and Neville.

"Harry?" Neville asked. "What in the world just happened back there? I thought for sure that Lestrangle was going to kill or torture me. But even though she didn't I think she still might. She's insane, Harry."

"I think you're right, Neville. But she doesn't want to hurt you. I think she wanted you to help her in some way, and when she finally got you, she didn't know what she really wanted. That bit with kissing me was freaky."

About that time the others caught up with them, and Harry felt that his analysis of the situation could wait for another time. Lestrangle kept urging them to go faster. Snape was walking more on his own. Luna had lit her wand.

They hadn't gone that far when they noticed the temperature dropping. Harry handed Luna the wand controlling Neville.

"Professor, we have to stop the Dementors!" Harry said, to Remus.

"Idiot boy," Snape answered. "Dementors are immune from virtually all magic."

"Go ahead, Harry. I don't have a wand," Professor Lupin answered.

"Lestrangle still has mine," Snape added, unhelpfully.

Harry turned toward the darkness behind the group, took a deep breath, and said, "Expecto Patronum!" in a commanding voice. Some silver mist flowed from the end of his wand.

"There's no way a boy can cast that spell!" Snape commented with a sneer.

"Remember Harry! It's not enough to remember the memory, you have to feel it! Like that Latin phrase you pointed out in that story of the Last Supper. It's not just a memory, it's a way of making it present and real! You have to feel the happiness you're remembering! OW!"

The last exclamation was accompanied by Remus bending over, and clutching his stomach.

"Stupefy him!" Snape demanded. "He's turning into a werewolf! We'll all be killed!"

Remus stopped groaning, and gasped out, "Only if you messed up the potion."

"Of course I didn't mess up the potion, you fool!"

"Then you're in no d. . .AY. . .ger from me!" He fell on the ground and the transformation started, accompanied by yells of pain that soon turned to howls of pain as his vocal anatomy changed. Snape moved as quick as he could down the tunnel, away from the Dementors, and perhaps memories of this tunnel and another encounter with Remus.

"What does that mean?" Harry shouted at Snape.

"He took the wolfsbane potion. He won't lose his mind, and shouldn't attack any of you. Me, however, he hates, so I'm leaving."

Luna came back to Harry. "Harry! The Dementors!" She had let Neville down gently.

Harry noticed Neville standing up, and using the wall for support, moving down the tunnel at a hop. Lestranger went over to help him.

"You dropped Neville?"

"None of us were going to get out of here if you don't stop them." There were shapes in the darkness behind them now.

"I need a happy feeling," Harry said, mostly to himself, as he tried to bring one up against the despair of the Dementors.

Luna leaned close to his ear, and whispered, "We're getting married as soon as I'm seventeen."

Harry smiled, and said, "Expecto Patronum!"

Harry's Patronus appeared, and hopped down the tunnel towards the Dementors. They had no way to go but back. It kept up chasing them, not letting a one get by it, although several tried.

"Oh! Harry! It's a Crumpled-Horn Snorkack! How come you never told me?"

"I tried, but it seems that every time I did something came up, and I'd forget."

"We should help Remus now."

They went to their honorary uncle and found they could do nothing for him. Professor McGonagall always started off her first Transfiguration class by changing from a cat back to herself. The Animagus transfiguration was like water flowing from one container to another. Not so the werewolf transformation. It was like forcing a round peg into a square hole. The body didn't morph into the new shape, it broke and reassembled. Even with the wolfsbane potion, it was a painful transformation. Luna and Harry were soon looking at a wolf, and the remains of Remus' clothes. Luna quickly collected those.

"You'll probably want these tomorrow," she said.

The wolf nodded wearily.

"Well, let's go. The others have gone ahead."

They headed down the tunnel much quicker. Remus, of course, could have gone twice as fast, but stayed with the children. They came upon Snape, still unsteady.

"Hello, Professor," Harry said. "Where's Neville and Lestrage?"

"She picked him up and ran down the tunnel. I take it you found your 'happy thought'?"

"Oh, yes. And if the Dementors come again, I'll drive them off again. Funny, nothing I read or was taught about the Patronus charm said anything about someone making you happy while you cast the charm."

"I'm sure that is more information than I want to know. If it's not something you can do in public, I doubt the books would mention it."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but all that happened was Luna said something to me to make me happy. Remus, you better go ahead and make sure Neville is fine."

Remus the wolf took off down the tunnel.

- - -

The chaos in the castle had taken a while to sort out. The confusion and general fear was increased when a rumor about students being bitten by a werewolf circulated. Dumbledore eventually arrived and sent the students to their respective common rooms. It wasn't until he was interviewing the wounded students in the infirmary that he found out about Neville and the animal. (Madam Pomfrey had already told the students that they were not bitten by a werewolf.) Leaving the students in the healers stern but expert care, he and Professor Flitwick hurried out towards the Whomping Willow. Dumbledore had a sinking feeling that it was too late, though.

- - -

She may have been crazy, but she wasn't superwoman. She ran for a while, then slowed to a walk. The tunnel was over a mile long, and she was no athlete. She once again magically reduced Neville's weight, and carried him as quickly as she could.

"Why did you do this?" Neville asked.

"I hoped you could help me, but you can't. No one can help me. If it means anything, I'm sorry."

"Sorry you tortured me?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry."

"And that's supposed to make my parents better?"

"No. Reversing the Colligpsych will make them better. Weren't you listening before? They're not crazy. They're just locked inside their own heads."

There was the sound of movement behind her. She turned to see the wolf running down the corridor. She wasn't sure what to make of this. She aimed her wand at the wolf and it stopped.

"Are you here to hurt Longbottom, wolf?" Lestrangle asked. The wolf shook its head. "Are you here to hurt me?" Again, it shook its head. "Then go ahead of us."

It very carefully moved around them, and started trotting towards the exit.

A short time later they reached the exit. Remus jumped up through the exit and, unseen by Bellatrix, hit the knot in the wood that caused the tree to stop moving. Neville and Lestrangle followed. She signaled the wolf to move ahead and stared at the unmoving tree, wondering why it didn't attack. She mentally shrugged and moved him out of reach of the Willow. She placed Neville on the ground.

"Get your parents healed, Longbottom. Then tell them that I'm sorry for them, too. I'm sorry for so much, but I guess it had very little to do with you. I've got to go. I have to work tomorrow. Give this back to Snape."

At that point two figures were making their way towards the Willow from the castle. Bellatrix tossed Snape's wand to Neville and started running away from the castle. Remus went to Neville and looked him over.

"Professor Lupin?" he asked, incredulously.

The wolf nodded.

Dumbledore, moving quickly for a man over 140, and Flitwick, moving quickly for a man with such short legs, were soon over to them.

"Is everyone alright?" Dumbledore asked.

Remus tried to answer but only got stares.

Neville decided to translate. "Well, I was mauled by that black leopard, and Professor Remus is a werewolf. Oh yes, Professor Snape was battered against a wall when Lestrage thought he had hexed Harry's hair off."

"Harry? Harry who?"

"Harry Lovegood."

"Harry was dragged away, too?"

"No, he and Luna came to rescue me. And then Professor Snape showed up."

"So where are professor Snape and the Lovegoods?"

"Still in the tunnel."

Dumbledore looked over at the Willow in the evening light, and noticed it starting to move.

"Remus, can you stop the Willow, so they can get out safely?"

Remus ran over to the Willow and hit the knot again with his foot.

Which was a good thing, because Luna popped her head up from the opening among the roots.

"Hello Professor. We can probably use some help getting Professor Snape up. He's pretty tired."

Remus barked at Dumbledore and Flitwick, which got a wave, but no other reaction. Remus growled.

"That's alright, Professor, I'll go get them."

She walked over to the Headmaster and Charms instructor.

"We can use some help getting Professor Snape out of the tunnel," she said, calmly.

- - -

Later, in the Hospital Wing, after everyone had said everything about what happened (except for the name Lestrangle called Harry), and everyone who was hurt was given the proper terrible tasting potions, Harry and Luna were dismissed.

As they were leaving, Dumbledore said, "Oh, Mr. Lovegood. Good work on casting that Patronus charm. How did you ever learn that?"

"Professor Lupin taught me."

"Why would he do something like that?"

"I asked him to."

"Why would you do that?"

"After I saw Cho fall off the broom because of them, I didn't want that to happen to me."

"Ah, Quidditch. The source of great inspiration among many of my students. And do you know why Lestrangle thought you were someone else?"

Luna spoke up, "If you had heard her, you'd know that she was crazy. She went from yelling at Neville for hurting himself, to mistaking Harry

for someone else, to beating up Professor Snape, to introducing herself to me -- wild mood swings in a blink of an eye."

"Yes, that matches her encounters with her family."

"Professor," Harry asked, "could the healers help Neville's parents with the information they have?"

"It's possible, Mr. Lovegood. That spell she mentioned, Colligpsych, you may not know, has both a Latin and Greek root. The Greek magical tradition was virtually lost during the Roman occupation. A lot was recovered from books in the middle ages, however, and this may very well be a dark merging of traditions. And being at least partially Greek -- a very different tradition -- that may have accounted for it not being detected before now. All we have is an avenue of research that we didn't have before, so I wouldn't hope for too much. It's too early yet. I haven't even passed the information to St. Mungo's. Good night."

They walked towards the Ravenclaw tower, until Luna pulled him into an empty classroom. Quickly casting her privacy charms she turned to Harry.

"Harry, do you know why Trixie did what she did to you?"

"No."

"I think she thought you were your father. If anyone figures that out. . . ."

"Oh, no! I hope not."

"I just wanted to warn you, so the less said about that, the better. I think we should just keep emphasizing that she was insane. Then people might not try to assign rational motive to what she did."

"Alright."

"One more thing. . . ." Luna closed the small distance between them, and kissed him very well.

"Thank you for saving us," she whispered, when they broke for air.

"Any time," he answered, going for another kiss.

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"You're sure this is a good idea?"

"Trust me, Luna."

"If you say so."

"Fred! George! Got a minute?" Harry got the twins attention in the corridor outside the Great Hall. It was only a few days after the Lestrage incident, and the school seemed back to normal.

"If it isn't our neighbors. . ."

"Who blew up the Great Hall. . ."

"What can we. . ."

"Do for you?"

"We need a diversion," Harry said.

"This sounds interesting. . ."

"fun. . ."

"naughty. . ."

"against the rules. . . ."

"Just the sort of thing. . ."

"we like. But we need. . ."

"Details. Who?"

"What?"

"When?"

"And especially, why?"

"Who are the teachers. When is leaving day. What is for you to decide. And why. . . ."

As Harry hesitated, thinking how to answer, Luna spoke up, "Why is to smuggle something out of the castle."

"Ooo! This does sound interesting, brother-of-mine."

"Indeed, and what would you need to sneak out of the castle?"

"You'd never believe us if we told you."

"Is it small?"

"No, that's the problem. There's no sure way to hide it, so that's why we need the diversion."

"Why is it that these two keep coming up with ideas that put us to shame?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should hire them?"

"We'll keep it in mind. But really, what are you smuggling out?"

"Sorry, guys, we really can't tell you. Someday. Maybe next school year. Alright?"

"We'll hold you to that, Harry."

"Thanks guys. Now here's what I was thinking. . . ."

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It was a week and a half after Lestrangle kidnapped, and mysteriously returned a student, the Friday before the last weekend before exams, that Neville intercepted Harry and Luna in the great hall at lunch.

"I'm going to St. Mungo's! They've cured my parents! They're still very disoriented, and don't know anything that's happened since the spell was cast, but they're cured!"

Luna said, "I'm so happy for you, Neville," and gave him a hug.

Harry grabbed his shoulder, and said, "Great luck, mate! Uh, Neville? Are you going to be able to do any studying for finals?"

"I'll be studying with my parents this weekend, and after my last final I'll be with them all the time. They should be home by that time."

"I'm happy for you, Neville," Harry said.

As Neville was about to go, he turned to them and asked, "What ever became of Lestrangle?"

Luna answered, with that dreamy expression that Harry was coming to recognize. "I think she may have found what she needed when she found you. She's gone away, and you'll never see her again."

"Trust, her, Neville. She usually knows what she's talking about, even if it sounds strange."

Neville nodded, and left the hall.

"I don't sound strange."

"Sometimes you do."

"Do not."

"Sometimes."

"Never."

And so on, all the way through lunch.

- - -

About a week and a half before the least interesting fight ever witnessed by the Ravenclaw table, Jo was in early to work at the Surrey Zoo. She discovered that Warriorette was back in the cage. She looked at the black jaguar, and asked if it was going to stay put now. The only answer was a snarl. Jo went to get the animal's food.

- - -

"Why are you so insistent that I pack tonight? How would you feel if I came to the girls dorm and helped you pack?"

"Because we're going to be busy tomorrow morning, and won't have time for it then. And you can't get into the girls dorm. Brighter minds, but worse morals, than yours have tried. Can't be done."

"Sounds unfair."

"Put this in, and stop complaining that you can't sneak into the girls dorm. Sometimes I wonder about you, Harry Lovegood."

"Hand me that pile. You know I'd only sneak in to see you, Luna Lovegood."

"Oh, give me a break!" Tom Towey complained from his bed where he was reading.

- - -

"Aunt Sibyll!"

The ladder descended, and the two Lovegoods ascended.

Luna, who somehow never remember to put on her watch, asked "Time?"

"Train leaves in 60 minutes."

"I hope that's enough time."

"We have to get Aunt Sibyll to keep moving."

"Aunt Sibyll!"

"OW! Don't yell. Do you know what time it is?"

"Yes, Aunt Sibyll. Eight O'clock, and the Hogwarts Express leaves in sixty minutes. We have to be on it, and you have to get dressed and packed and escort us to the train."

"What? Why am I packing? And why am I escorting anyone to the train?"

"Here take these, but don't chew them. Wash them down with this."

"Ugg, that's a particularly disgusting color potion. What is it."

"Orange juice. Don't look at it, drink it."

"Gag. And those white things?"

"Aspirin. Daddy says that aspirin and orange juice sits a lot better than any hangover potion he's tried. Now go get dressed and get packed. We don't have much time," Luna said as she led the teacher back to the living quarters of the Divination tower.

"Why am I getting packed?"

"Because you're visiting us. Daddy won't take no for an answer this time."

"Of course I'd love to. . . ."

"Good, then get dressed."

While she was helping Aunt Sibyll get ready, Harry left an envelope on the mantle where the vase used to be.

- - -

"Why aren't we taking the central stairways?"

Uncle Larry's hangover cure must be working, Harry thought. She's not whinging as much.

"We're running out of time. If one of the stairs swings the wrong way, we might have to wander through the castle for an additional ten minutes, and we don't have the extra time."

"Oh, very well. This all seems sudden."

"But it's well planned. Time?"

Harry checked his watch. "Eight-thirty-six. We have to pick it up. We have only four minutes."

"Aunt Sibyll? Would you mind if we went a little faster? We need to be at the entrance hall in four minutes."

"This is all very confusing. If I didn't have this headache, I'm sure my inner eye would show the whole situation to me."

"Everything will be explained when you see your brother Larry," Harry said, encouragingly.

"Wait! That way would get us to the Entrance Hall faster."

"But it would put us between the Entrance Hall and the central stairways. Trust me, you don't want to be there right about . . . now."

At 8:40 on that particular leaving day the central staircase was the site of one of the largest indoor fireworks displays that Hogwarts had ever seen. Students (mostly Gryffindors and Ravenclaws) went scattering in all directions on all sorts of levels. Teachers, including Professor Dumbledore, hurried there from the Entrance Hall. Luna reached the Ravenclaw Stair, the part of the stairway in the Entrance Hall that headed north, and the most direct route for students to go

from the Great Hall to the Ravenclaw Tower. Across the way was the Gryffindor Stair, which headed south. She quickly surveyed the Entrance Hall, signaled Harry that it was clear, and they made their way down the stairs.

Once in the Hall, Luna told Sibyll to go get them a carriage. She and Harry pulled their trunks from the pile left by students getting a quick bite in the Great Hall. They hurried outside, and found the carriage (pulled by the creatures Harry couldn't see) and took off for the train station.

"We did it!" Luna exclaimed.

"We owe the Weasley's big time," Harry said, nodding.

"Can someone please explain why I feel like I just escaped from prison?"

"Daddy will tell you everything when you get there. Can you Apparate, or will you be taking the train with us?"

"I can certainly Apparate."

"Then you'll find out as soon as we say our goodbyes and you talk to him. Don't worry, everything will work out."

She still had a puzzled look on her face at the station as they said their goodbyes, and she Apparated away.

They were met at the door to the train by the Weasley twins. "How'd it go?"

"Did you get it out?"

Harry answered, as they accepted the Twin's help with their trunks, "Went perfect, and yes we did."

"We don't see it, though."

"All we saw was you being hugged and kissed by a teacher. What's that all about?"

"Aunt Sibyll is my father's sister."

"You're related to a teacher?"

"Luna is. Less me."

"How closely related are you?"

Harry told the truth, as Luna had looked it up that year after the incident with Clearwater. "Fourteen degrees."

"On the shortest path, and that's not even the Lovegood path. We're actually closer related through the Black family."

"So you share a great, great, what?"

"Five greats grandfather," Luna said.

"Ever think that wizards either spend way too much time worrying about that sort of thing, or are too inbred?" Harry asked.

"Wow, we're a lot closer to the Malfoys than that."

"Hey, you changed the subject," one of them said, helping the former second years into an empty compartment.

"Yeah, what does Professor Trelawney have to with this?"

"Did you see what was attached to her bag?"

"Harry!" Luna scolded. The twins looked at each other in confusion.

"You got her to smuggle it out! That's brilliant!"

"That's all the hints I'm giving," he told Luna. "I did promise that we'd tell, probably next year."

Luna added, "That's all the hints, then. Thank you for all your help."

"You're. . . ."

"Welcome."

"Can I sit here?" Hermione asked entering the compartment.

"Sure," Luna answered.

About ten minutes later, the train left the station. They had a relaxing ride. Hermione was a little peeved when Harry and Luna didn't want to talk about grades. They were visited by many classmates and friends, and the ride went quickly. Harry and Luna refused to talk about their encounter with LeStrange any more -- they had recounted it twice to students, once in the Ravenclaw Tower and once in the Great Hall study group, where first through a few fourth years had been able to listen in. They did talk a little more with Draco, since it was his Aunt (who he had never met), but beyond that they refused to discuss it any more. Dumbledore had kept everyone's names, except Neville's, out of the paper. All the Prophet could report was that Neville and two students, a professor who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and a Professor that was trying to rescue the others were captured by Bellatrix LeStrange, seemingly for the sole purpose of apologizing to Neville. It also said that she was quite insane, but didn't appear to want to hurt anyone. Professor Snape disagreed with that last statement, but only to Dumbledore.

As the train pulled into the Kings Cross the corridor was filled with students waiting to get off the train. Hermione looked out at the full isle, and closed the compartment door.

"Luna, can I talk to Harry alone."

"No."

"No."

"This is really personal."

Harry looked at Luna, and said, "Then tell us both."

Hermione, seeing that neither was going to give in, said, "OK. I figured out that you're Harry Potter."

"No, I'm Harry Lovegood. Check the records. Check the Hogwarts admissions. Try to send Harry Potter a letter, see if I get it."

"That doesn't work. Someone, probably the Ministry, has been intercepting all of your mail. It mentioned that in the Prophet about four years ago when all those stories about Harry Potter being missing or dead were published. And you have the same godfather as Harry Potter, and you never talk about your parents and Harry Potter's father was named James and Neville said that LeStrange woman called you Jim, so I think you look like him, as they were in school together. And he was a Chaser, and Professor Lupin said your father was a Chaser."

"Wow!" Luna exclaimed. "What breath control." Hermione just glared at her.

"Hermione, it doesn't matter what you think. I'm Harry Lovegood. Officially and legally, and every other way, I'm Harry Lovegood. But tell me about Harry Potter. What would the other students do if he came to Hogwarts?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"Did you know that Ginny Weasley has, or had, a crush on him when she arrived?"

"No."

"Would you expect that to be a fluke or would more girls also have crushes on him?"

"I don't know."

"Did you know that not less than three people accused of being Death Eaters tried to find Harry Potter the year after he was hidden?"

"No. How. . . ?"

"Do you think Harry Potter could have a normal life?"

"I don't see why not?"

"Then you're not listening and your not thinking, which could get you kicked out of Ravenclaw."

Luna chipped in, "Why does it matter to you, Hermione?"

"Because I like the truth."

"I don't think so. You didn't answer Harry's question about a normal life truthfully. Consider your own motives very carefully, Hermione. And consider how many other lives you could ruin with an accusation like that."

"It's not an accusation. . . ."

Harry answered, very coldly, "You want to keep being our friend? Keep out of my private life. It's not your plaything. It's my life. Come on, Luna." Dragging their trunks behind them, they left the compartment.

Hermione stood there, feeling like she was going to cry. But she hadn't done anything wrong!

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AN: The scene with Luna chasing Mrs. Norris away is very much like one from Michelle-31a. It wasn't until after I wrote it that I thought it seemed very familiar. I think it's from her novel Luna's Year.

I want to thank my beta-readers Kaetie and Meg. Unfortunately, due to real life, they were unable to give this chapter as good a review as they normally would, so don't blame them. But I am thankful for all the assistance they do give.

Chapter 15

Horcrux Summer

Kingsley Shacklebolt stood on Platform Nine and Three Quarters, and surveyed the crowd. The scene before him was like the reverse of the end of summer where the children met their friends; this was when the adults visited with people they hadn't seen in a while. He was anxious, but not as bad as he had been after Lestrangle's visit with Mrs. Malfoy. At that time he would have said that there was a greater than fifty percent chance that Lestrangle would attack the Hogwarts families here.

But she had accomplished her purpose on May 25th, and no one had seen her since. He still couldn't believe that she would choose to live among the Muggles, but he had to admit that there was no clue as to her whereabouts. He kept a wary eye out anyway since Lestrangle wasn't the only person who might wish misfortune on the assembled families.

Pettigrew was a good example of one of those with malicious intent. There were rumors of him in the independent, lawless areas of the Carpathian Mountains. Shacklebolt thought that if he were on the run, that would be where he would head. It had been months since the last report. Was he still alive? Had he joined someone or some group there? Was he coming back? Shacklebolt had to admit he didn't know.

He had recommended that his special task force, created to capture the two escaped criminals, be returned to regular duty after today. He did recommend increased patrols of Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, something that he hoped the Minister would implement, this time. The Aurors had been understaffed for a long time, and patrols had been cut steadily over the years. The Minister was being penny wise and pound foolish in not keeping the Aurors fully staffed. Kingsley thought that was why he had called the Dementors in to guard Hogwarts -- he didn't want to pay Aurors to do it. There were times he really hated Fudge.

He noticed a couple talking quietly amid the noise and chaos, as the train pulled in. The woman was tall and dressed in expensive robes,

with a hood up, hiding her face. He recognized the man from his early years as an Auror. He moved over to them.

"Larry? Larry Lovegood? Is that you?" he asked.

The man looked up. "Yes. And you are?"

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, sir. We were together on the Hildago Trading Company warehouse raid during the war."

"Shacklebolt? Oh, yes! I remember now. That was a bad bit of business."

"Yes, sir." He got a look at Mr. Lovegood's hooded companion, and recognized Mrs. Malfoy.

"Ma'am," he said, nodding his head.

"Hello, officer. Are you picking up a child?"

"No ma'am. I'm here for security. Though I have a feeling that I won't be needed." He scanned the crowd, which had become even more chaotic with the surge of school children.

"You're not checking up on me?" she asked, with an amused smile.

"No, ma'am. You convinced me that you had no information on your sister's location."

Draco appeared from the throng carrying his trunk. Mother and son hugged and immediately began talking about the year. Kingsley nodded to the two adults, and moved into the crowd.

A few minutes later Harry and Luna joined the group.

Luna said to Draco, "I think Hermione needs help getting her trunk off the train."

Draco looked at her quizzically, then turned to Narcissa. "Mum, do you mind if I help her?"

"Go ahead, Draco."

"Sorry to abandon you, Narcissa," Larry said, "but we have a very busy day ahead of us."

"Really? The day's almost over."

"Yes, well we leave on vacation tomorrow."

The two children squealed in delight.

"We'll talk to you later in the summer, Narcissa!" Larry called back to her as the trio pushed their way through the crowd.

"Have a good trip, Larry, children!"

Draco met Hermione in the corridor, dragging her trunk towards the exit and looking rather upset.

"Let me give you a hand, there," he said, getting the handle on the other side of the steamer trunk. "Ugg! What do you have in here? Bricks?"

"Books!" she said, sharply.

"Sorry!"

"No, I'm sorry. I'm just. . . I don't know."

"Want to talk about it?" Draco asked, concerned.

"No. At least not yet. I have to think about it."

"If you need to talk, I'm here."

"Thanks, Draco."

- - -

"Alright kids, get your trunks unpacked. Follow the instructions on your beds, and then we have to go." Larry helped the children out of the fireplace in their home. They had floo-ed directly from Platform Nine and Three Quarters. He was now directing them up the stairs.

"Why so sudden?" Harry wanted to know.

"Two reasons. I was able to get away to cover a symposium in New Goetry. The QJJS is getting the lead researchers in the field together, and I get to be in the audience."

"The Queue Jay what?" Harry asked.

"The Quarterly Journal of Jackalope Studies," Luna answered.

"Hurry up now!" Larry yelled.

"Where's Mum?" Luna asked.

"She's waiting for us at the airport."

"Airport?"

"Yes, we're travelling like Muggles this time."

The two children found a detailed list of things to take, as well as a pile of clothes already set out for them to pack. They loaded one trunk with their stuff and made sure they each had a book to read, as per instructions. After Larry checked to make sure they had everything, they stood beside the road, and he raised his wand. With a bang, the large, purple Knight Bus appeared. The ride made up for being uncomfortable by being quick and they got out at Heathrow Airport. Over a half hour later they found the restaurant where they were to meet Aunt Selene. To Harry and Luna's surprise, Aunt Sibyll was there, too. She was without most of her beads and chains, only had one shawl, but otherwise looked mostly the same.

"Aunt Sibyll? What are you doing here?" Harry asked.

"She's coming with us." Luna answered.

Harry looked at her. "When did you find out?" he asked, slightly annoyed at being left out of the loop.

"I didn't. I just figured it out."

"That's my girl. We'll make an investigative journalist out of you, yet. Yes, Harry, Aunt Sibyll is coming with us on this vacation. Both because I haven't seen my sister in ten years, and I think a certain someone who locked her in a tower for the last ten years might be looking for her. So, we take Muggle travel, at least until we've left England, and at least for a few weeks we ignore the jailer of young, pretty women."

Luna and Harry watched Aunt Sibyll blush and Luna's mother laugh. They were taking the "red eye" flight and there was still plenty of time before the plane left, so they sat around talking after dinner. Then they checked their bags, and slowly made their way through the airport to the gate, observing how the Muggles lived.

"I could do with a bit of Sherry," Aunt Sibyll said.

"Sorry dear. Remember what we said, we want you clear headed," Selene said.

"But still," she whined.

"There, there, Sibyll, we're here to help you," Larry said.

"Thank you, brother."

"This may not be a fun vacation," Luna spoke quietly to Harry.

"Why do you say that?"

"Do you remember when you first came to the house? Daddy had a problem with drinking too much. Mum had to lock up all the liquor, remember?" Harry nodded. "Do you remember the bad days?"

"A little."

"I think it's going to be like that with Aunt Sibyll. She's been drinking too long, and we're going to be around when she stops."

"That doesn't sound like fun. Why now?"

"She can't do it alone. She's been alone for many years. Now that she's with us, we have to help her. There's no one else."

"We rescued her once. This can't be any worse."

"Yes it can, but we'll have Mum's and Dad's help."

- - -

The trip on the plane was, in turn, exciting as they boarded and waited for it to go, fascinating (or frightening) as they took off, then boring as they flew for hours, and finally uncomfortable as they found that sitting in a seat for seven hours was close to painful. After they disembarked at Kennedy Airport in the New World and claimed their luggage, they crashed at a hotel. They got two rooms with two queen sized beds. Luna and Aunt Sybill shared one room; Harry had one bed and Selene and Larry another in the other room.

The next morning they made their way to the wizarding section of New York and took a public Portkey to New Goetry.

While they were getting their tickets, the worker remarked while looking at Larry's passport, "Came by Muggle plane from England, huh? Why's that?"

"I wanted to experience it at least once. And this seemed like the right time to do it."

"And what did you think of the experience?"

"Once was enough. Or maybe once was one too many. Next time, it's portkeys for me."

Harry, listening to this exchange, whispered to Luna, "It may have been long, boring, and uncomfortable, but I didn't feel dizzy, nauseous, or falling down afterward. Boy, I hope that Apparation is better than floo or portkey travel."

"Don't count on it. I heard it's like being squeezed through a rubber hose."

"Great! Another magical method of travel designed to be unpleasant."

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, made his way up to the Divination Tower.

It was time for Sibyll's annual appreciation dinner and Diagon Alley shopping trip. It was also time to reinforce the spells that kept her safely in the tower. He looked at the mantle and noticed the vase was missing. With a feeling of dread, he raced into the living quarters and found that his Divination Professor was missing, too. He searched her rooms -- most of her stuff was still there, but it did look like she packed before going. He walked back to the classroom.

How could someone get past his spells? He had to admit that he was quite powerful magically. Even after a year, no one should have been able to notice the vase. But what if someone had accidentally knocked it over? He went to examine the area around the fireplace. That's when he found the letter.

There was no name on the outside. He opened the envelope, and removed a parchment. It was printed rather than written. That might be a clue, as the Muggles had machines that you could fit in your home that would print like this. Or it could have been a printing press. He read the short note, and felt his stomach do little nervous flip flops when he was finished.

Dear Headmaster,

There are terms for people who lock young women up in towers. One common term would be ten to twenty years in Azkaban. Leave Sybill Tralawney alone, or we'll find out what kind of term you get.

The note was unsigned. He cast a few detection spells, but nothing showed up. There was no magic involved in this note.

He had to make sure she was safe! What to do? What to do?

- - -

In New Goetry they rented a furnished apartment for two weeks. Selene got Harry enrolled in an advanced flying camp. He was placed with students his own age at first, but then moved up to a higher age group when they saw him fly. Several hours every day he learned about broom capabilities, and got a chance to fly on numerous current model broom types; he learned Seeker tips from a professional Seeker; he learned Chaser tactics (but wasn't very good at implementing them), which also were used in Quadpot.

He also played Quadpot. For most of the students, that was the highlight of the day. He had fun playing the game that can be described as a combination of keep away and hot potato. You had basically nine or ten (depending on the formation) Chasers from each side trying to get the Quaffle-like ball into the goal basket while an equal number of the other team were trying to stop you and steal the ball. And to make it more interesting, the longer the ball was not in the basket filled with calming potion, the more likely the ball was to get explosively upset. And if you were holding it (or the last one holding it, should it be in mid-air when it blew up), you were out of the game, and your team was down a player.

There were strategies involved in knowing when not to steal, or when to give up the ball in the hope that it would explode while the other team was holding it. During one of their games, everyone was sure the ball was about to explode, so each person who got it would pass it to one of the players on the other team. It went back and fourth four times before it did explode.

- - -

While Harry played, Selene, Luna, and Sybill did a lot of shopping.

A few days after settling into the apartment, Harry and Luna were sitting in the living room enjoying the cool, mountain breeze that came through the windows. They cuddled, using the breeze as an excuse.

"Harry, I don't think Aunt Sibyll is coming back with us."

"Why do you say that?"

"We were looking at furniture today. And Mum said they'd look at apartments tomorrow. I think Aunt Sibyll will be staying here."

"Will she be alright living here alone?"

"Mum's been introducing her to people like crazy. I think she and Daddy are also trying to get her a job."

"Wow, that's got to be a big step for her. Locked up for years, and then suddenly she gets her own place and a new job, and new friends. I hope she gets new friends?"

"Me too. After being alone so long, I think she'll have problems with that. But Mum's trying."

"Can you see if she'll be alright?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean sometimes you know things. It's like what Aunt Sybill called her inner eye. You knew Neville would meet Lestrangle."

"I don't know how that happens. Sometimes I know things because I keep my eyes and ears open, unlike certain people sitting here that I could name. And sometimes I just know. But I can't make it happen. And I don't know what will happen with Aunt Sybill. I just hope that she'll be fine."

"Me, too."

- - -

The Hogwarts Express had taken them from the school on Friday. On Monday, Harry started Flying Camp, and the Jakalope conference started on Thursday. On Thursday morning, at breakfast, an owl delivered a letter addressed to The Lovegoods.

Frank, Alice, Neville, and Augusta Longbottom

Invite you to an open house celebrating Frank and Alice's recent recovery

And thanking our friends and family for caring for our family when we were unable to.

Please visit with us between Noon and Seven P.M. on Saturday, July 3rd

At Longbottom Manor

There was a PS written in Neville's hand.

PS. Uncle Algie says you're on vacation. Sorry you won't be here, but I want to thank you for being my first friends. Neville.

They were disappointed, but knew there was no way they could get to the party. They sent back a note thanking Neville for the invitation and wishing his parents good health.

- - -

Luna went to the Jakalope conference with her father. In the evenings she told Harry about meeting Professor Gharlane of Endore School of Magic, one the leading authorities on Jakalopes and Baluit Crest Cats. The second day she and Larry had lunch with Mr. Hummel of Boston (the American one, not the one on the North Sea where Remus lived) who had presented his research on the lavender Jakalopes. Their color had been found to be caused by their fur having a vanadium-

oxide doped corundum that made them virtually bullet and magic proof. And the final day she just bubbled at the key note address given by Professor Elmer Fudd, the acknowledged expert in the field of Jakalope studies. He had Muggle movies of the strange, dangerous creatures, and Luna's description and enthusiasm made Harry truly sorry he didn't go.

- - -

On the Saturday, before Luna went to the conference, due to time zones, the party was going full tilt at the Longbottom Manor. Neville had invited his entire year at Hogwarts, as well as a various other people, like the entire Weasley family. Narcissa and Draco came early and spent almost the entire day. Hermione and her parents arrived in the middle of the afternoon. Shortly after she joined the festivities, the three soon to be fourth year students were gathered with Frank and Alice and had to recount the Troll incident. Neville's parents were impressed by their courage and loyalty, and secretly shocked that a Hufflepuff and a Slytherin would be friends. After the meeting, Hermione pulled Draco away from the crowd.

"So, what's up?" he asked.

"If you knew something about someone, what would you do?"

"Nothing like being vague, huh? It depends on what it is. And I suppose it depends on your house. A Slytherin would keep the information for blackmail or to use as a weapon at some point. A Hufflepuff would figure out who would it help and use it that way. A Gryffindor couldn't keep his mouth closed, and would just disclose it, and a Ravenclaw would just warm themselves on the knowledge that they know something that others don't. Oh, and write a book about it."

"Prat."

"Hey, you're the one who started talking in generalities. I mean, what information? A crime? An embarrassing little secret? Someone cheated on a test? I don't have much to go on."

"Sorry. I don't think I want to give it away, so unless I tell you more, I can't expect a better answer. Sorry about that."

"Hey, no problem. You asked, I answered the best I can. You know I can keep my mouth shut."

"I know, but I don't want to say. It's not my secret."

"Fair enough. I don't want you breaking any promises."

"But that's the thing. I didn't promise anybody. I just found out."

"Would this secret hurt or help someone if it were known? Or both?"

"They say it would hurt. But I don't know."

"Oh, so you talked to the, er -- secretees?"

"I don't think that's a real word, and yes. They weren't happy that I knew and were pretty upset that I would tell."

"Would it help anyone to know?"

"I don't know."

"But they, whoever they are, don't want it known."

"No."

"Do you like them?"

"I did. They were pretty mad when I found out."

"Then keep it to yourself. As you said, it's not your secret, and if you're a friend, respect their wishes."

"Thanks, Draco."

"Any time!"

- - -

"Hi, Neville." Hermione found Neville off by himself near a flower bed. Actually, she had been watching him for ten minutes wondering if she could get him alone.

"Hi, Hermione. Enjoying the party?"

"Yes, it's very nice. I like you parents. They're fun."

"That's something I didn't expect. My Dad said that they're a lot younger mentally than they are physically."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"If Harry Potter were to come to Hogwarts this year, how would people react to him?"

"Besides swarming him and asking questions, I think there'd be a lot of hero worship."

"Well, he did defeat You-Know-Who. He is a hero."

"Yeah, but he was just a baby. I know I couldn't remember my parents being tortured until the Dementors forced me to remember. . . ."

Hermione suddenly blurted out, "The Dementors!" Realizing that she had interrupted Neville, she said, "Sorry, just thought of something. Go on, please."

"Uh, anyway, I would guess they would expect him to be some great and powerful wizard, all for something that he doesn't even remember. You know how tired Draco got last year of people asking about his aunt? It would be at least as bad as that."

"A lot of people didn't get the hint. . . ."

"And they wouldn't get the hint from Harry Potter, either. Then there's the escaped and free Death Eaters who might want to get revenge."

"Are there many?"

"A number of people who were commonly believed to be followers of You-Know-Who did get off. Some claimed to be doing it because their families were threatened, some claimed the Imperious curse was cast on them, and some named names and got off with shorter prison time."

"But everyone thought that LeStrange was after you for revenge, and that was wrong."

"She was crazy, Hermione. I don't think even she knew why she came after me. But the ones who never went to Azkaban wouldn't have that problem. I think disappearing was the best thing that could have happened to Harry Potter. What?"

"What 'what'?"

"You have a strange look on your face. I was wondering what you're thinking."

"I'm thinking I never thought about it that way. Thanks, Neville."

"Uh, any time, Hermione."

- - -

"Hi, Ginny!"

"Hi, Hermione."

"Can I ask you a question, Ginny."

"Sure."

"What do you think would happen if Harry Potter came to Hogwarts this year?"

"That would be so cool! Of course he'd be a Gryffindor, and I bet you'd be so sorry you transferred out."

"Why would it be 'so cool'?"

"To go to school with the Boy-Who-Lived! There wouldn't be anything cooler than that!"

"But what if he didn't like the attention?"

"He wouldn't get that much attention. I'm sure it would be a big thing when he came, but after a while most people would forget about it. But I'm sure he'd be on the Quidditch team. His father was captain, you know; and Chaser. And I'm sure he'd be a prefect and Head Boy. I wonder which girl he would bump off the team?"

"What if he went out for Seeker and bumped you?"

"Don't be silly, Hermione! He'd go for Chaser, like his father."

"I see," said Hermione very slowly. "And you'd like to be on the team with him? It wouldn't bother you that he got all the attention?"

"Well, he'd get a lot of the attention, I'd suppose. But I'd be on the team with him, and we'd have to spend a lot of time together. You know, at practices."

"And you'd like that?"

"Of course, he'd have to marry someone. And being on the team with him. . . ."

"And you want to be that someone?"

"I don't know, but wouldn't it just be so great to be married to the Boy-Who-Lived?"

"I don't know. I don't think I've ever met him."

"Yeah, well, he's not at Hogwarts, so I guess I'll probably never meet him. But sometimes I daydream, you know?"

"Yes, we all daydream about our Prince Charming, don't we?"

- - -

"Good party, Neville."

"Thanks for coming Draco. Sorry we didn't get a chance to fly."

"Next party."

"Speaking of flying, Harry's going to a flying camp in the New World. Harry. . . ."

"What?"

"Oh, something Hermione said. She was asking me about Harry Potter."

"Wonder why?"

"Don't know."

"Anyway, Mother's probably waiting at the fireplace. Thanks again."

As he made his way to the fireplace, Draco wondered if Hermione's secret had anything to do with Harry Potter. But then, she had said 'they.' Who would 'they' be with a secret about Harry Potter?

- - -

Their second week in the New World was spent shopping and setting up an apartment for Aunt Sibyll. Larry had gotten her a job doing the Horoscope for the New Goetry Gazzette. It wasn't a full time job, but she would supplement her income answering letters to the Advice Column of the Quibbler and perhaps doing some freelance work. She was also free to get any job she could in New Goetry, even teaching. She was pretty sure she didn't want to do that both because it might

draw attention from back home, and she wanted to put that life behind her. She was going to be using the Lovegood name, and that was a fairly thin disguise.

Harry missed most of the shopping and arranging of the apartment, because he was still at flying camp. They did have dinner as a family in the evening, and even took in a show one night. Luna and Selene got away for some mother-daughter quality time a few times, too.

A few of the evenings were hard, when Aunt Sibyll really wanted a drink, or didn't think she could make it on her own. They did their best to comfort her, or ignore her yelling. They got her into an Alcoholics Anonymous program. Harry overheard Uncle Larry telling Aunt Selene that he felt better leaving her here after she joined.

Saturday, the day before they were going to return to Britain, Harry got a letter. The post owl flew off after Harry took the envelope from its leg.

"Who's it from, Harry," Selene asked.

"I don't know. I don't recognize the handwriting." He opened it, and glanced at the signature. He paled a little.

"What's the matter?" Selene asked. Luna looked up from the magazine that she had been reading.

"It's from Hermione," Harry said.

"Is that a problem?" Selene asked.

"She's a very smart witch," Luna answered, walking behind the chair Harry was sitting on to look at the letter over his shoulder.

Dear Harry,

I asked some people about the other Harry, the one you were probably named after. I admit I was wrong. Where ever he is, he's probably better off than here. I don't know what else I can say than sorry. I would like to continue being your friend.

Hoping I see you this summer,

Hermione Granger

"That's a strange letter," Selene said, having also moved behind Harry.

Harry looked around. Larry and Sibyll were out, spending some time together, and getting a few more things for her apartment.

"Hermione figured out who I really am," he said with a sigh.

"It sounds like you persuaded her to keep it quiet."

"Yes, but I don't know if she can be trusted."

"Harry, the truth always comes out eventually. Someday, someone will figure it out. It will happen. It may not be for years. Or it may happen before we get back home. If Hermione can figure it out, then someone else will figure it out, too. Don't worry about it."

"I'd rather no one know it at all."

"It doesn't matter Harry," Luna said, hugging him from the side of the chair. "We can at least trust Hermione."

"What makes you say that?" Harry asked. "Is this another something you 'just know'?"

"No, this is something where you're not observing and deducting. If she was going to give you away, it isn't very likely that she'd send this note saying she wasn't going to, would she? She knows that no note would make us stay her friends if she gave us away."

"I guess you're right."

"Of course I am. Let's go get dressed. We're going somewhere nice to eat tonight."

"And how do you know that?" Selene asked.

"Observation and deduction. This is the last night we have to spend with Aunt Sibyll, so we have to go somewhere nice to make it as memorable as possible."

"Fine! Go get ready!"

- - -

Albus Dumbledore, the Supreme Mugwump, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and bearer of many other titles, struggled to pay attention. Barty Crouch was going over various points in excruciating detail while Dumbledore and a dozen other people from various Ministry departments were finalizing their plans for the next year. He had had to postpone the Headmaster's annual (drinking) retreat, and all this was delaying his searches for his Divination instructor and Harry Potter.

It was strange seeing last year's Head Boy sitting at the table with the heads of the various departments involved in planning the event. He certainly seemed cut out for government work -- he was polite, officious, boring, and nit-picky.

Oh, no! Someone objected to the wording in the current document again. Add another twenty minutes, at least! Everything was supposed to be finished last Friday. Here it was mid-afternoon Sunday! He glanced at his watch -- it was almost 4:00.

He had decided to try to find Miss Trelawney and give her a semi-true explanation, and apology. At the same time, he also wanted to make sure that she was as secured as possible. There wasn't much else he could do. Whoever had helped her escape certainly had a big club to hold over him. He wondered if he had gone too far. He didn't think so, but others might not see it the same way.

Looking over the list of actions that would have to be done once this meeting was over -- meet the other headmasters, co-ordinate with the relevant Ministries of France and the German States, come up with

the individual tasks, get them set up. . . . He didn't think he would have any time to hunt for Harry Potter this summer.

He had the strangest feeling that Harry Potter and Sibyll Trelawney were in the same place. But that was certainly ridiculous. . . wasn't it? He glanced at his watch. Still almost 4:00.

- - -

"Good bye Aunt Sibyll!"

"Good bye, Harry!"

The former Divination instructor and former second year student hugged, the last of the family hugs before most of them took a portkey to London.

They staggered out of the travel agency where the portkey had deposited them. Harry still felt queasy after losing his breakfast. They started down Diagon Alley while Big Ben ran out the time.

"Hey! It's four! We finished breakfast a few minutes ago!" Harry exclaimed.

"Remember, Harry? Different time zones? The Rocky Mountains are seven time zones different from London time. Seven hours earlier," Uncle Larry said.

"Oh, right. This could get confusing."

Larry chuckled and added "Back before the wizards were driven out, the old Rus Empire had seven time zones. You had to be careful when you fire-called someone. Especially someone important who could have you executed."

- - -

Peter Pettigrew wasn't having a good year. He had almost been caught. Again.

He had barely slipped out of Athens. Bucharest's underworld decided the reward for him was enough to make it worth their while to hunt him down. Budapest had been unpleasant. Prague was too close for comfort, and had forced him to change plans. He headed south. Vienna -- well, he didn't want to think about Vienna. Milan was painful. Naples was where he thought his luck had changed. He tried sneaking on board a ship headed to England. The stowing away part worked, but it was the wrong ship. In Algiers he had insulted the wrong people. He was almost killed there, but it was somewhat refreshing that it has nothing to do with his status as a wanted escapee. He took off cross country, and eventually crawled on to a bus heading west. He was now in a city on the Atlantic outside a place called Rick's without any money. He could probably rob a local, but that's what started the trouble in Algiers.

He made his way behind the building and searched for the garbage. It was a good thing he was a rat. Had he been a lion animagus like he had hoped, none of this would have been possible. He still needed to get to England.

- - -

The next two days were what Selene called "the vacation to recover from the vacation." They unpacked, cleaned, did a little school work, but overall, nothing strenuous, or for any length of time. They were told that no plans were being made, because of something coming up.

Larry went into the Quibbler office everyday and Selene worked on paperwork at home. She would disappear for an hour or two a day, going to her office. Harry and Luna were responsible enough not to make a mess that couldn't be cleaned up quickly.

This only lasted two days, though. Wednesday morning started as usual with Harry and Selene up early making breakfast but before it was done he was sent to get Luna up and dressed and get dressed himself. Luna wasn't a morning person, and was slowly getting ready when her mother called them down for breakfast. Harry got to the kitchen to find they had a guest, Algie Croaker. Luna, after several more calls, finally joined them.

They ate, talking about their recent trip, and Larry left to go to the Quibbler offices. Harry and Luna cleared the table, and were told to sit down.

"Children, Mr. Croaker helped me destroy the two dark objects you found. He's going to help us get to the others. Would you please tell me how you followed the black lines?"

"Daddy told us how. He said that if you follow the line from two different places, where the lines meet is where the target is."

"Daddy knew about this?"

"No. I just asked him how to find something if you only knew the direction to it. But when we're close enough, we just follow the line."

"Very clever," Algie nodded. "We want to see if we can find the other two."

Harry spoke up, "They're in Little Hangle? No, that's not right."

"Little Hangleton," Luna said.

Selene gave them a "what have you been up to" look. "And how do you know that?"

"A few years ago you went away to a conference, and Daddy took us to the Lake District. We followed the line to an area warded against wizards and Muggles. I remembered the town's name."

Algie looked at Selene and said, "That makes it simpler. And then we'll have to hire these two. They're too dangerous to leave around."

"I think they should finish school first."

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"Alright. You two, do well in school, and there's probably a job waiting in the Department of Mysteries for you. Of course, to work there, you have to be able to keep your mouths closed; that's why we're called Unspeakables. So you can't tell anyone about this. It will be your first test."

"We can keep things quiet. We kept the cup and locket quiet for years."

"Yes, well. Why don't you get ready, we'll take a little trip to the Lake District."

- - -

After some discussion they packed for several days. They portkeyed to Lancaster, rented a car, and headed north. In Greater Hangleton they checked into an inn then made their way to the nearby town where they found that neither child remembered the roads. With Luna's gift, though, they made their way to the spot where they had been several years before. Walking through the wild fields they passed the Muggle repellent ward, and came upon the anti-Witch and Wizard one.

"Couldn't you Apparate through it?" asked Luna.

"If we were sure that there was no anti-Apparation ward on the other side, we could. But if there is, then we'd be splinched all over the place, including on the other side of the wards. We might not find all our parts, and I don't relish that possibility," Algie answered.

"So how do we get past?" Harry wanted to know.

Selene answered, as they started walking through the fields, following the ward around whatever it was guarding. "There are several ways to get past a ward. None of them quick, easy, or undetectable, which is what you want if you're the one putting up the wards. We could drain the magic off it, but with a powerful ward like this, it probably has a number of power runes. So we'd have to drain it faster than it can regenerate itself.

"Another way would be to find the runes that anchor the ward. Destroy them, if possible, and the ward falls. They may be hidden under the ground, beneath the ward, so we wouldn't be able to get them unless we get past the ward, in which case it doesn't matter.

"Or we could do like you did with the book; counter the ward. You had to learn a lot of fire spells in order to get the right counter, though. There aren't any wizard attraction spells, really, so it wouldn't quite work.

"It's looking like we have to drain it."

Algie nodded, "Unfortunately, I agree."

Harry plucked off some burrs from his pants, walked around a bush, and asked, "But how would whoever put up the ward get past it?"

"They leave conditional openings in it. For example, your home wards stop anyone from Apparating into the house unless the person is known to the ward. It's like having a specific shaped hole in the wards, and if you're not the right shape, you don't fit. Your home wards probably allow your mom and dad in, but I doubt many others."

"Actually, they don't. When we first set up the house, we didn't have the money to plug ourselves into the wards, so it's just a general purpose anti-Apparition ward. Although it's not designed to splinch you if you accidentally try to cross the ward."

Luna asked, "So could we make ourselves fit through the opening?"

"Not unless we knew the conditions, and even then, it might be impossible. For example, if the ward only allowed Tom Riddle though, there's very little chance you could change yourself to be Tom Riddle."

"But could you change the shape of the hole to make it fit you?" Luna asked, squinting at the hillside next to them. Harry knew she was examining the magic closely.

Selene said, "There's no real way to do that."

"Why not do it like with the anti-fire ward? We basically changed the ward. I don't think we did it permanently; it would have eventually gone back to the original magic, I think. But it wasn't so much the fire spells we researched that we used to change the ward, but the knowledge about fire spells."

"Huh?"

Harry tried to explain, "It wasn't any of the fire spells themselves. It was the experience with all of them that allowed us to affect the fire ward. But theoretically, we could do something similar here."

Algie glanced at Selene and asked, "So, what you're saying is that using your technique, you can get past any ward?"

Luna thought for a moment and nodded. "I think so. Which suddenly renders wards a lot less useful, don't you think?"

"Don't ever tell the goblins about this. They'd probably kill you just to keep you quiet." Algie shuddered at the thought of the Goblins finding out that their magic wasn't as useful as they thought.

It had taken over two hours, but they circumnavigated the wards without finding any source for it, which is what they expected.

Algie said, "Well, that's it. We'll have to set up the power drains and see if we can't get rid of it that way."

"Can we try?" Luna asked.

"Try what, dear?"

"Try to shape the ward so we can get past it."

Algie and Selene looked at each other and said, "Go ahead. I'd love to see how this is done."

"We'll need to use our wands," she said, looking at Selene for permission. They had been allowed to have them during this outing, "just in case." Just in case of what, wasn't specified.

Harry cast the Mage-sight spell on himself and stood next to Luna. He hated that spell. It inevitably led to a headache. He had, at Luna's urging, tried it in the Great Hall of Hogwarts; that had been a mistake. The headache was instantaneous that time as he was almost blinded by the colors of magic that flowed through the castle but especially powered the magical ceiling.

Now, he could see the wards both the anti-Muggle one behind them and the anti-Witch and Wizard one in front.

"See the mind magic, Harry? It's throughout the whole thing. To change that would be like re-writing a book. I'm hoping that we can just rewrite that part, see the green-gray squiggle with the bits of pink and red?"

"Squiggle?" asked Selene, casting the spell on herself.

"It's a technical term," Luna answered.

"I see the green-gray, but not the other colors," Selene said.

"I don't either, but the spell isn't as good as Luna's sight," Harry explained.

"Now watch this," Luna said. She pointed her wand at the wall of color and a green-gray beam of magic came from it and struck the ward. None of the others could see any change.

"OK, Harry, you try."

Harry had long ago come to the conclusion that Luna just did magic differently. To the other students wand movement and incantation were tools for bringing the mind and will to the proper place to make the magic do what they intended. Luna had begun that way, too. But as her gift grew over the years, she came to the place where she just recreated the shape and color of the spell. Harry had spent

numerous evenings his first year at Hogwarts under the Mage-sight spell and Luna's tutelage trying to do the same thing. He had been partially successful, but still found it easier (and less painful) to cast spells the regular way.

He pointed his wand at the ward and released his magic. His initial attempt was too blue. He relaxed his mind and modified the magic and it changed to more green. He smiled to himself. This happened often when they tried this. The link between him and Luna was blue and he thought that his feelings for her were what caused his magic to shift blue. He concentrated more and the color slowly became the same as Luna's.

Luna then started waving her wand in little patterns. Selene and Algie could see a lot of little colors in her magic beam. The colors became more regular, and actually fewer in number, as she got into some sort of rhythm.

"Push, Harry!"

Selene and Algie were surprised as the magic coming out of Harry's wand changed from a stream to a river. They could see Luna's magic increase, too, but no where near as strong as Harry's.

Selene suddenly figured it out. "He's powering the spell, and you're making it do what you want!"

"Yes, but we're not strong enough! This ward is too big."

Suddenly, Harry's magic disappeared. He sat down, panting.

"That's not going to work," he gasped.

"No," said Alie, "but it was a good effort. We'll get the ward drainers set up, and come back and try again."

"Oh, my head!"

Selene said, "Let's get you back to the inn." Later, Selene and Algie got a chance to speak alone.

"You realize what we saw today?" Algie asked. "We saw a lot. What in particular are you talking about?"

"Wards. With someone like Luna, any ward that has an exception is open to her if she has enough power. And it seems that she's trained Harry to supply the power that she needs."

"You make her sound -- conniving?"

"Sorry, that's not what I was getting at. With her gift, I don't think she has a choice as to how she looks at magic, and Harry's just being the normal, sweet, helpful person we know him to be. And it did take training. I couldn't just send magical power of a certain type. But what I was thinking was that wards, the area affect magic we use to protect ourselves, might not be as protective as we want."

"But it's her gift, more powerful than anyone I've ever heard of, that lets her do that. Even the mage sight spell doesn't give us enough information, and I'm a fully trained witch and you're theoretically a fully trained wizard."

"Thank you for that vote of confidence, youngster."

"Any time."

"Yes, at the moment, she's the only one we know who has this power. But that doesn't mean others don't. And even if no one else has it, it doesn't mean that no one else ever will. I would guess that they'll have children."

"I try not to think about that. I'm too young to have grandchildren."

"I would guess just a few more years, so get used to it, Mrs. Fully Trained Witch."

"I suppose we'll have to propose a research project into better wards."

"Eventually. Lets break this one, first."

- - -

That evening Harry went to bed early in the room he was sharing with Algie, while the other three travelers were checking out the Muggle television. Harry's head was still pounding, and he couldn't take the flickering light from the TV. In the middle of some show with Geoffrey Palmer, Luna went to Harry's room to talk.

He was lying in the dark, all ready for bed. She took off her shoes and slid in next to him.

"Harry?"

"Hi, Luna. Sorry I didn't do your hair tonight."

"That's OK, Harry. There's something I didn't tell Mum and Uncle Algie. Actually, I was a little scared to tell them."

"What's that?"

"The other line, the one that moves? It isn't with the object in the middle of that ward. It's somewhere else. Probably nearby, but not there."

"Why does that bother you?"

"I think that black line is attached to someone. It's just always been different. And I don't know that I want Mum and Algie to find it. It may be too dangerous."

"That means we have to leave the connection for a bunch more years until we can go after him."

"Him?"

"If it's attached to someone, and these hor-things are anchoring that person to the world, then the only person it could be is Voldemort."

Luna sighed, "Yes. And some day we'll have to go after him. It's the only way to keep them safe."

"Will we be safe? I don't want anything happening to you. And you know all those stories about how powerful Voldemort was."

"I know. But we're Ravenclaws. We'll arm ourselves with knowledge, make a plan, and get rid of him once and for all."

"You're very confident."

"I'm very confident of you. Good night, husband."

"Good night, wife."

They shared a special kiss, and Luna went back to the other room.

The next day, they returned to the Meadow.

- - -

They were allowed to visit with the Weasleys for a while on Friday, but were told to make no plans for Saturday. Saturday, after breakfast, Selene and the children floo-ed to the Ministry of Magic. Harry and Luna trotted over to the Fountain of Magical Brethren.

"Dobby may be crazy, but he never looked like that," Harry said.

"I don't think a goblin could look like that. And certainly not when looking at a wizard," Luna replied.

"Come along children," Selene said, giving the fountain a look of disapproval.

They went to the security guard, and checked their wands. The guard was a little surprised when Harry and Luna presented their wands.

"You do know the laws against the use of magic by students, right?" he asked.

"Of course," Luna answered.

Harry looked at Selene, and grumbled, "As if she'd let us forget."

Selene told the guard, "But I want to impress on them that a witch or wizard is never without his or her wand."

The guard handed the wands back. The Lovegoods made their way to an elevator and rode it down, arriving at the Department Of Mysteries. She led them to a black circular room. Once in, the room spun around them.

"I'm glad it's the room and not us that spins," Harry muttered.

"Offices," Selene said once the room stopped spinning.

A door opened, and led to a long room with desks on one side. She led them most of the way down the room, and pointed to a desk that seemed indistinguishable from the others.

"That one's mine. We're not allowed to leave anything out when we're not at our desks. We can't even have pictures out. Not as interesting as your father's office, is it Luna? Come on."

She led them to the other end of the room, through a door, and into a smaller hall with a number of doors leading off it. She knocked on one of the doors. It was opened by Algie Croaker.

"Good, good. You're here. We don't have much time. Are you sure you want both of them to hear it? It may not be good news."

"They'll tell each other anyway, but they'll never tell anyone outside the family. We've had years of practice at that, haven't we, kids?"

"Yes, Mum."

"Yes, Aunt Selene."

"Then let's go. I think we're going to find out why Aunt Sibyll was locked up."

As she was talking, she led them through various doors, halls, and into a strange room filled with racks of hourglasses. There was a giant hourglass with an egg that hatched and grew into a bird, then regressed into a chick, and back into the egg. Luna whispered to Harry, "This room is full of time magic."

They came to a room full of rows of shelves, each shelf full of little glass spheres. They walked through the giant room and turned down one aisle that looked no different from any of the others, except for the number on the end. They walked between shelves 97 and 98 and most of the long way down they stopped. Algie nodded at a sphere, and Harry saw the sign beneath it:

S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D

Dark Lord and (?)Harry Potter

"What is it?"

"It's a prophecy, Harry. S.P.T. is Aunt Sibyll. This is the only prophecy she's made that's stored here. And A.P.W.B.D. is Albus Dumbledore. She made a prophesy, he made a recording of the memory of it, and the Department of Mysteries stored it here. Only you and the Dark Lord can move it, Harry, because it was about you and him. Take it down, please, dear. Let's hear what cost Sibyll her freedom for so long."

Harry lifted the sphere without any problem.

"Now, touch it with your wand."

He did so, and a ghostly image of Aunt Sibyll appeared. They listened to the prophesy, given in a voice not her own and as the image faded they looked at each other pensively.

Uncle Algie told Harry to put the sphere back, and they made their way out of the room, out of the Department of Mysteries, and out of the building. They floo-ed back to the Meadow from the lobby, and sat around the kitchen table.

"Why don't you two go out to play. We'll talk about this later, all right?" Selene asked the children. They nodded, and went. Selene called Larry and told him to sit.

"Larry, we were searching for a reason why Dumbledore kept Sibyll locked up? We think we found it."

"And the reason is?"

"She made a prophesy and he heard it. It concerns the Dark Lord and the person who will vanquish him."

Algie interrupted, "Could."

"And who is this, er, vanquisher?"

"Harry."

Algie stroked his chin, and remarked, "This explains the rumors of Dumbledore spending his summers searching for Harry Potter. If he thinks that Harry's the only one who can kill Voldemort. . . ."

Larry shuddered, and Selene said, "Vanquish."

"Ok, vanquish Voldemort, then it sort of makes sense for him to try to find him. It doesn't make sense to lock up Sibyll."

Larry suggested, "If it was known that she gave a prophesy, it might make her a target of You-Know-Who."

Selene wondered, "Can they get a prophesy out of a seer if she's in a trance?"

"I don't know. I'm sure someone has tried before, so I'll look into it. Meanwhile, what about the specifics of the prophesy. What is the power 'the Dark Lord knows not?' "

Meanwhile, two children were in the backyard talking about the mysterious power, too.

"What do you think? What power do I have that Voldemort doesn't know?"

"I don't know. Animagus?"

"Hardly. And I still can't transform my right arm. And I haven't even tried my head. I did get the tail the last time I changed my butt."

They sat for a while, thinking, talking, suggesting things, but rejecting them.

"Hello."

"Hello, Willow. How are you today?"

"Very fine, thank you, Harry. You seem puzzled."

"We are," Luna answered. "We heard that Harry has a power the Dark Lord doesn't know about, and we're trying to figure it out."

"He can talk to snakes."

"Yes, but so can Voldemort."

"But does he know that you can?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

Luna looked skeptical. "So, virtually anything you can do could conceivably be the power 'he knows not.' Aren't prophecies wonderful? Anything you do that overcomes the Dark Lord fits the prophecy as long as he doesn't know it. And they wonder why Ravenclaws don't take divination."

"Well, if that's the case then it's worthless trying to figure it out," Harry concluded.

They spent some time visiting with Willow and getting all the news about the plants and animals in that part of the woods. They went

back inside and informed the adults that the prophecy was useless. None of the adults at the table could fault their reasoning.

After the children left, Selene let out a soft moan. Larry immediately went over to her and put an arm around her.

"Why? Why does it have to be him? Why Harry?"

"I don't know. I don't know."

"You know, there was another child born at the same time," Algie said. "My great grand nephew, Neville, was born in the last minutes of July 30th. He too falls under the prophecy. And given that Voldemort isn't going away because of these Horcruxes, I don't think it would be beyond reason to get him and Harry some training."

"What about the laws against under aged magic use?"

"What pure-blood family follows those?"

"The Weasleys." Selene answered.

"Yes, well, there's always one, isn't there? Of course, with seven kids it may be self preservation. But that's neither here nor there.

"We'll get a licensed tutor, and get by the law that way. I'll talk with Frank and Alice, and see what we can set up. It won't be intense. But it should be worthwhile. I'll get back with you."

- - -

"Alice, Frank, how are you doing."

Algie was shown into the parlor of Longbottom Manor by Neville. The boy then left.

"Just fine, Uncle Algie. But I must say, your note was a little," Frank paused, looking for the right word, "mysterious?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were available. I recently discovered something, and I think you have the right to know."

Algie gave them the wording of the prophecy. When he was finished, Frank and Alice looked at each other.

"So that's what it was all about," Frank said.

"What?"

"That October, 1981, Dumbledore told us that he had learned something that he couldn't tell us, but that it put our, and Neville's, lives in danger, and wanted us to go to a Fidelius protected house. He never told us what, though. I take it the Dark Lord knew?"

"I have no idea. We recently discovered the prophecy in the Hall of Prophecies, and know nothing of it's history, who was there, or who else knows."

Alice said, "Thank you for letting us know. At least now we understand. But it's all water under the bridge."

"No, I'm afraid it isn't," Algie said, gravely.

"What do you mean? He's gone, isn't he?"

"He is, but he will probably be back."

Alice's eyes widened in fear. "How?" she whispered.

"Sorry, my oath prevents me from telling you. We have a small team working on it, but I figure that anything we can do to prepare will help."

Frank asked, "Have you spoken to the headmaster about this? He was in the forefront of the fight last time."

"We don't quite trust the headmaster."

Alice looked shocked, and said, "What? Not trust Dumbledore? Are you daft! The man would never work for the Dark side."

"Sorry, you misunderstand. It's not that we don't trust which side he's on; we don't trust his judgment. For example, he didn't tell you the prophecy. There were some other very bad decisions that he made immediately after the war. Let me ask you this, has he ever spoken about giving Neville extra lessons, or special training?"

Frank and Alice looked at each other, and she answered, "We're not sure."

"Not sure?"

"No. On Christmas during his first year in Hogwarts, he received an invisibility cloak. The note that came with it was unsigned, but I recognized Dumbledore's handwriting. I wonder if he was trying to get Neville to use it for something specific?"

"Did he ever use it?"

Frank answered, "A few times, to get snacks from the kitchen after hours. But you're saying that the headmaster should have taken some action because of the prophecy?"

"I think so, yes. I bet that he, like a number of people in the Department, fear that Voldemort will return one day."

Alice thought for a moment and said, "Why? I know you can't tell us what you know, but why do so many other people think that You-Know-Who will return?"

"They call it the Law of the Unknown Cause. If they don't know what caused something to happen, there's no way to tell if it will unhappen, or if in the same situation the same thing will cause the same outcome. Basically, they don't know why Voldemort was seemingly destroyed, so they don't know how good a job Harry Potter did."

"But you know something else," she said, in a matter of fact way.

"Yes.

"But I also wanted to talk about something related, sort of. You know the Lovegoods?"

They nodded. Frank said, "He used to be an Auror."

"And she works with me. She wants to get some extra tutoring for her children, and I was wondering if you want in on it?"

"What sort of tutoring?"

"At this point spell accuracy, speed casting, and maybe some silent casting. We'll see how it goes. We're not talking Auror boot camp here. It'd probably be once a week for the rest of the summer."

Frank and Alice had one of those unspoken conversations that married people can have, and said, "If you add in basic review, sure. Neville has a new wand, and it's much more compatible with him than my old one, but his spells, the few he's tried, are more powerful and a bit uncontrolled."

"Who is the tutor?" Alice asked.

Algie told them.

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The kids reverted to a more regular summer schedule: most days at home, Fridays at the Weasleys, but Monday they went to the Swamp and had spell tutoring. The first Monday they got there Uncle Algie introduced them to their tutor. His face was scarred, and he had a wooden leg with the foot carved like a bird claw. He also had a magical eye colored electric blue that spun in its socket.

"Hello. I'm Alastor Moody, and I'll be teaching you some Auror tricks of spell casting."

- - -

The day before Harry's real birthday, he, Luna, Selene, and Algie took a portkey to Little Hangleton, ending up next to the ward.

"If this were a real ward breaking, we'd let the drainers run for a few more weeks. Or, if we were in a hurry, we would have inundated the area with them."

He pointed at a white, stone cube that was sitting in the middle of the ward. There were runes engraved in it on each side. Algie continued, "Then, after the ward was effectively dispelled, we would search for the power runes, and destroy them. However, we don't have the resources to do that, without being detected by the bean counters and bringing our little activities to the attention of the Ministry. So, barring that, we hope that the ward is weak enough for you to get us through."

What he didn't tell Selene or the kids is that he wanted to see Luna and Harry working together to get through the ward. They spoke briefly, Harry cast mage sight on himself, Luna cast the first spell, giving Harry the information he needed to power it, and Luna began to shape the ward. Algie had already cast his own mage sight spell, and watched in fascination as Luna modified the ward.

"It should let us through now," she said, as she and Harry stopped their magic.

The group walked through the ward and came to the other side.

"Uh oh," Luna said. "Another ward."

"Yes, but this one I recognize. This is the anti-magical transport ward. An anti-Apparation, anti-portkey, anti-broom ward. It shouldn't affect us."

They walked through it without noticing. They crested a hill and were presented with the sight of a run down cottage surrounded by hills. The ground on all the hills glowed.

"Some sort of trigger?" Harry asked.

"Yes, but I don't see what it triggers. Let's go over there." Luna pointed about a third of the way around the surrounding hills. She continued, "The front door's over there, and that looks like it may have been a path at some point."

The group made its way towards the dip in the hills. When they reached it they found no relief from the magical trigger. Luna squatted down near the magical field with a quick "be careful" from her mother, and Algie and Selene started casting detection spells. Harry noticed a snake approaching the magic field.

"Hello, Miss Snake," Harry greeted her in Parseltongue. Neither he nor Luna had been able to figure out how he knew a boy snake from a girl snake, but he was always right.

"Greetings, Speaker. There hasn't been a Speaker around here for generations. You're not going to hurt us, are you? Legends say the old Speakers would hurt us."

"I'd never hurt you. But I was wondering if you know that you are about to enter a magical area?"

"Oh, yes. Inside is our place. The magic keeps all others away."

"How does it do that?"

"If food were to walk into the magic, it burns it. Then we go get a well done meal. It's usually a mouse, but sometimes there's a rabbit or squirrel. Now and then a hedgehog. I can't eat a rabbit, but a cooked mouse or small hedgehog is a nice change. Not as tasty, of course, but on those cool spring or fall days when you just can't get up the energy to stalk something, it's nice."

"So the magic doesn't harm you."

"Not if you say the magic words."

"May I know the magic words?"

"Of course, Speaker." She slithered up to the edge of the magic, and said, "Let me pass." She slithered into the magical field, and all around her, the field could be seen greatly dimmed.

"Harry, dear? What did the snake say?" Selene asked.

Harry informed them of all he heard. Luna and Harry helped them say the Reptile speech spell, and then they all asked the magic to "let them pass." They walked through the field without trouble and reached the house. The magic stopped a few feet away from the house. The door, besides being old, stained, and weathered, was spelled in some way.

"More trigger spells," Luna said.

"Yes, dear, I see them. Algie? What do you think?"

"If all that black is any indication, it's a very nasty and potentially deadly spell that would be triggered if you open that door. Step over there a moment."

"Algie! You're not going to open the door!"

"No, of course not. Oh, Harry? Can you make sure I get the pronunciation right?" He stepped to the magic field, and asked to pass in Parseltongue again. After getting a nod from Harry, he stepped down the path a little ways. He pointed at the house with his wand and cast a blasting curse. The curse hit the wall next to the door, and a hole was blown through the side of the house.

"Reducto," Harry whispered to Luna. "We'll have to remember that one."

The aftermath of the spell continued longer than what was expected. The interior was filled with strange sounds -- something like a buzzing of a bee and a whip crack, and a flash of light associated with each noise. Smoke began to come from the inside.

"Is the house on fire?" Harry asked.

Algie answered, as he carefully approached the hole. The flashing lights and strange sounds had subsided. "Wouldn't think so. Most wizarding houses are spelled to not catch on fire. Pretty standard. But let's see."

He looked in, and signalled the others to approach. They did so, but he wouldn't let them in the room. There was a faint glow across the floor -- another trigger. All around the room glowed brighter spots, in the walls, ceiling, furniture, other items lying about.

Near the floor were burning or smoking pieces of wood from the hole they were using.

Algie looked confused. "Weather magic? Why are all those spots glowing with weather magic?"

Selene shuddered and answered, "Lightning. Those are similar to the spell I was using on that security system that almost killed me. I bet anything that strikes the floor will get a bolt of electricity through it."

"Shall we try?" asked Algie.

Selene nodded and conjured a rock, which she tossed in. As it hit the floor, there was a flash and the noise they had heard before, and the rock shattered.

The room itself took up most of the house. It was a combination kitchen and sitting room. There was a fireplace, stove and a sink, a table with some wooden chairs, and a couch and a stuffed chair. There were also two doors leading to the left, but they were closed.

"I don't think we should assume that the let me pass password applies here. It's just too risky," Selene said. "However, lightning takes a long time to regenerate the runes, even assuming that each one has a power rune. We could try to force it to use up the power."

Algie agreed to try. He cast an Avis spell, and a half dozen birds appeared from his wand. They flew inside the house and landed on the floor. They were blown apart by the lightning bolt. Luna looked away. "I'm sorry, Luna. I should have used something else."

"No, that's alright. I know it has to be done. And it's not like they were real birds."

"That's true. But maybe something else. . . ."

"No, you can do six birds at a time. Go on."

Selene joined Algie in filling the room full of feathers and burnt birds. Selene also taught the children the Bubble-Head charm to hide the smell of burnt bird. Harry also picked up the Avis charm, and was soon sending his own flocks of birds to their doom. Finally, they reached a point where the birds were landing on the floor but nothing happened. Algie carefully stepped into the room.

"He may have outfoxed himself," Selene said, following Algie into the room.

"What do you mean?"

"He put all those lightning bolt charms on things in the room, sort of as a worst case scenario. They were set to go off sequentially. But you can't do that with the power up runes. They're all trying to use the ambient magic to recharge the charm. One rune might take hours to recharge a lightning bolt. Those things took power! But with all of them trying to drain the local magic? It could take days or weeks. I think were safe from those. Luna? Where is the line going?"

It was pointing at the mantle above the fireplace. On it sat an unadorned wooden box.

"Lord, save me from plain wooden boxes," Selene said. The mantle and everything around it was also covered in magic.

The adults started casting their detection spells as Algie asked, "So what do we have?"

Luna had moved to the wall and squinting at the box as Harry answered, "A headache."

Selene snorted. She pointed at the base of the fireplace and said, "The flagstone moves if we touch the box."

Algie added, "But not right away there's a delay."

Harry said, "That wood is filled with fire magic. Is it supposed to burn us if we move the box?"

"Yes," Luna stated. "A bit of fire will fall from the flue and light it. Then, after we're burned the bottom opens and something comes out to finish us."

"Traps within traps," Selene sighed.

Harry looked puzzled and asked, "Why ignite the wood by dropping fire on to it? He could have just lit it directly."

Luna answered. "To cause fear? You get a moment to see your doom before the logs burst into flame, probably fill most of the room with fire. Then, whatever is held below comes up and takes care of you if you survived the flames."

Algie nodded, "He tried to think of everything. Any magic used against the box causes the rest to happen. Touch the wood, and the same thing. How to get around this?"

"If we could move the firewood, could we put a big rock or something over the base so it wouldn't open? Or if it did, it would be blocked?" Luna asked.

"Probably, but we'd have to move the firewood first."

Harry seemed to be looking at something in the kitchen, as he said, "Then Aunt Selene, you banish the wood, Uncle Algie, you create the cover, and Luna and I will stop the wood from igniting."

"How are you going to do that? If you cast anything on the wood, it will start the whole process."

Harry walked to the kitchen, grabbed a big pot, and put water in the bottom. He carried it back to the fireplace, and said, "Like this. Wingardium Leviosa!" He levitated the pot of water, and said, "Help me position it, Luna."

"Right in the middle, Harry." He floated it into the fireplace. Luna told Selene that it was in position, and she banished the wood through the hole in the wall. The moment she did that, a ball of fire fell from the top of the fireplace into the pot, and hissed as it hit the water. Algie was filling the base of the fireplace up with sand, then transformed it into stone. A moment later, a grinding sound was heard from beneath the new stone. It rocked as something below it tried to get out. That happened again and again until they were out of the house.

"Excellent work, everybody!" Algie exclaimed. He cast another spell over the box, grabbed it, and said, "Let's go!"

They got out of the house, crossed the fire field, and examined the anti-wizard ward. It had repaired itself enough that they couldn't get through it without adjusting it again, but since at that point they were outside the anti-portkey ward, they just portkeyed back to the Swamp.

Harry went to lie down, while the other three looked over the box. If you could get this far, there seemed to be no further traps, so they opened the box and found a thick ring with a black stone. There was a coat of arms engraved on the stone, which none of them could recognize.

Algie cast a spell, and said, "This is another Horcrux. But what about the other line? I thought you said they were together."

Luna looked down, guiltily, and said, "They are together, if you look from here. In Little Hangleton, though, they're at two different places."

"And you didn't think to tell us while we were there, young lady?" Selene asked, with that voice parents use to express anger and disappointment without actually shouting.

Harry's voice came from the doorway, "We decided it would be too dangerous. Especially after the prophecy."

"What do you mean?" Selene asked.

Luna answered, "The last one -- we think it's Voldemort. And if it's only Harry who has the power to vanquish him, then you shouldn't, and he can't, because he doesn't know how to do it. So no one goes until Harry's ready."

Harry walked to Luna's chair and put his hands on her shoulders. Selene saw the determination in his eyes and Luna's calm demeanor as she placed one of her hands on Harry's and she knew that nothing she could say would budge them.

She signed, and said, "Very well. But you are not to go after Voldemort without telling us."

"As long as we're in school," Luna answered, modifying the agreement.

"Very well. But I hope even after, if you have to go after him, that you would include us in your plans." Harry and Luna nodded. Algie took the ring to the Department of Mysteries, while the Lovegoods floo-ed home.

- - -

Harry's real birthday came with a few whispered "happy birthdays" and a special kiss from Luna. She was in his thoughts more often these days, and not just as a friend.

The summer settled down to a routine after that. Mondays, they were at Uncle Algie's with Neville and Mr. Moody. Tuesday and Thursday, Uncle Larry was home, and Harry and Luna were mostly on their own, although they had to show their lessons to Selene when she got home from work in the afternoon. Wednesdays were with Selene as Larry went to work. And Fridays were with the Weasleys while both of Luna's parents were at work.

Harry spent several weekend days with Uncle Ollie learning various aspects of wand making; shaping the wand on the lathe, drilling the

core, learning the runes, and preparing the cores. Harry learned he needed a lot more practice with the runes before he could engrave them on the outside of the wand, let alone learn the secret method that Olivanders had used for generations to engrave the runes on the wand core area. Harry worked hard and had a great time.

Luna spent those times either with her mother for some quality mother-daughter time or with other friends. She visited Liz Ericson one Saturday and Hermione Granger another.

They also spent an afternoon at Remus' place in Boston and went to a beach on the North Sea. While there Harry succeeded in transforming his right arm into the front leg of his animagus form. He was extremely nervous about doing the head transformation, and put off trying that. Remus said that eighty percent of the wizards who tried to become animagus were never able to transform their heads.

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Half way through August they received an owl from Aunt Sibyll. There were two letters. One was to the family as a whole, updating them on her new life and thanking them again for rescuing her. Larry had been in contact with her both personally and professionally, and knew that she was doing well. But it was nice to hear from her. The other letter was addressed to Larry. He read it over and handed it to Selene. She read it and got the children's attention. "This letter was addressed to your father, but we think you should hear it.

"Dearest Larry,

"To reiterate my other letter, I cannot thank you and your family enough for all you have done for me. As you know, we are the great-great-grandchildren of Casandra Trelawney, who was a gifted seer. I had always wanted to be a seer, and tried to force it. But, alas, I fear that that is not my gift.

"Yet our ancestor's gift still flows through our veins. Just recently I discovered that I am an Oracle. I may have been one for years! But being locked away no one would have heard any of my

pronouncements, and who knows what prophecies I may have issued that were never heard and recorded!

"But I now have an official prophecy stored in the Department of Prophecies in Montreal. Unlike visions given to a seer, I have no idea who this is for, or even what it means. "

Here is my first oracular pronouncement:

The rescuers will have their fun

This will lead to anger and pain

The anger to distrust

The distrust may lead to failure but the Dark Lord shall arise

The rescuers will have their fun

"If you have any insight into this, I would appreciate it.

"With all my love, your excited (and bewildered) sister

"Sibyll"

"That sounds ominous," said Harry.

Selene looked at the teenagers and asked, "Anyone want to speculate on the meaning? Are you two planning to do something fun?"

"Oh, Mum! You always said that marriage was supposed to be fun. I don't know that we could stop having fun if we tried."

"You know what I mean."

Harry said, "And we agreed not to do certain things until after the marriage ceremony. But getting back to what Luna said, we have fun when we study. We have fun when we go for walks. We have fun at our tutoring sessions."

Luna jumped in, "And who would have thought that crusty old Auror would make learning so much fun!"

Harry nodded. "I think that we have another instance of a prophecy that will only become apparent after the fact. We'll do something fun, and what? Someone will get hurt? Anger and pain? Distrust? And while this may lead to failure, it seems the Dark Lord is going to arise if we fail or if we succeed. I guess I don't understand the purpose of these things."

Larry shook his head. "Put that way, I don't either. Even being a seer didn't make Cassandra's life a good one. She couldn't change anything she saw, and she was forced to tell the truth. Eventually, I think she was killed by a German prince who didn't like her prediction. I never knew what Sibyll saw in that gift."

"Be that as it may, I want you two to be very careful. I'm not telling you to stop having fun. Just be very careful."

"Yes, Aunt Selene."

"Yes, Mum."

After they left Harry asked, "How can we be very careful about having fun?" "I haven't the foggiest, Harry."

- - -

The weeks passed away. Harry visited Mike Daly's house one day, and Mike returned the favor. Luna visited Liz a few more times. The hysteria over Bellatrix Lestrange's escape (which the students had missed by being in school for most of it) finished disappearing as the Minister of Magic reassigned the members of the task force charged with hunting the escapees down. Bellatrix hadn't been seen since her appearance in Hogwarts, and Peter Pettigrew was almost captured in Cassablanca.

Besides, the public had more important things to worry about -- getting tickets to the Quidditch World Cup which was being held in

England that year. Harry was interested, but didn't say anything after he saw how Luna reacted whenever Ron started going on and on about it. Besides, watching didn't compare with playing it.

After the Weasleys learned that their father acquired tickets through his work in the Ministry, there was no stopping Ron nor Ginny who talked about nothing else when they were with the Lovegoods. Charlie and Bill would be home, and there were two extra tickets. Mr. Weasley offered to take Harry and Luna, but they declined politely. In the end, Mrs. Weasley also decided not to go, and Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, and Penelope Clearwater went as dates for Fred, George, and Percy, respectively.

- - -

A week before the World Cup, and two weeks before the Hogwarts express was taking them back to school, Harry and Luna had their last tutoring session with Neville and Mr. Moody. The parents were there, as was Uncle Algie, to see their children's progress. They did some warm ups and then each had a duel with Mad Eye. Harry used a lot of dodging to avoid the attacking spells, and attacked with a lot of quick, rapidly fired spells that overwhelmed Moody's shield with their sheer number. Neville relied more on his shield, but also kept moving, while relying mostly on accurate stunning spells quickly cast. He wasn't as fast as Harry, but the stunners also eventually broke through Moody's shield. Luna did the least movement, but used a number of spells that didn't seem to belong in a duel - she cast fireworks, charmed a rock to blare music, cast a spell that caused the air between the two duelists to glitter as if it were filled with tiny bits of tinsel. She won when the singing rock paused in its concert, and she quietly banished it behind Moody. When it started singing again, he reacted by moving out behind his shield, which was where Luna's disarming spell caught him.

After the duels, they had a little party.

"You've got some good kids here," Moody said. "They're respectful, bright, sharp, and willing to work."

As they were chatting, Frank Longbottom said, "You went easy on them. I remember dueling you in Auror school, and none of them would have beaten you. I don't think you've slowed down as much as you showed."

"Of course I went easy on them. They're children. If I stunned them in the first few seconds, they wouldn't have had a chance to show you what they learned. And if I did that during class, they wouldn't have a chance to practice. This isn't Auror training. However, that little lady certainly kept me on my toes. She didn't use the same technique twice. Always coming up with something new. Her beloved would pick up her ideas after seeing them, too, but I asked him not to use them today. He's fast, both on his feet and with a wand. And your son is accurate, too, maybe even better than Harry. He isn't quite as versatile with his spells, though. He knows them, but doesn't have many he's practiced as well as the Stupify, so I suggested he stick with what he knows best. More practice, and he'll be Auror material, you mark my words."

Alice Longbottom asked, "What did you mean, beloved?"

"Oh, sorry," Moody said.

Selene sighed. "When Harry came to live with us, he and Luna swore a marriage vow. Very few people know, and we want to keep it that way."

The children were running around playing wand tag, taking advantage of the tutoring exception of the restriction on underage magic law. Frank was half listening to Moody's explanation of how his eye saw the bond between the two, but something was nagging at him. He felt that he should remember something, but it just wasn't coming. He said goodbye and thanks to Moody as the old Auror floated away. The adults returned to the yard and he watched Harry dive out of the way of a spell. The boy leaped up, brushed some dirt out of his short hair with a laugh, and took off in another direction to avoid another spell. That was when it hit him. It wasn't exact, but it was close enough to trigger the memory -- the hand in the hair and the laugh!

"Jim. Harry sounds just like. . . ." He turned all his attention on Selene and Larry. "You're raising Harry Potter!" he whispered. "That's why you wanted him to get extra tutoring. If You-Know-Who returns, he and Neville are likely to be attacked again!"

"Please!" Selene begged. "This is even more important to keep secret than their bond. As you said, if You-Know-Who or any of his followers found out, Harry would be targeted."

The children continued playing, oblivious to the fact that the adults were talking about Harry's condition when he arrived at the Lovegoods, the Horcruxes, the prophecy, and their need to eventually hunt down the remaining part of Voldemort. The Longbottoms agreed to keep the information to themselves but insisted that they be kept informed of Voldemort's activities, or as much as the Lovegoods found out. Larry and Selene agreed.

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On the night of the Quidditch World Cup, half the Lovegoods sat in the parlor listening to the game on the Wizards Wireless Network while the other half sat in the parlor reading. Harry had his eyes closed for most of the game, imagining the plays described by the excited announcer. He sat on the love seat with Luna, his arm around her shoulders. Every now and then she would touch his hand or rub his leg and whisper for him to calm down as he tensed up with excitement. The game finally ended, and they went to bed.

- - -

Peter Pettigrew took a big breath of the sea air, before being sick over the side of the boat. The hold of the cargo ship he was on did not have good ventilation, and the oily bilge gave it a disgusting smell. It was the high surf, though, that caused his stomach to reject what little was in it. He looked gratefully at the lights on shore, though. This part of his trip was over. There was a pop as he Disapparated. He appeared in the city he saw from the boat, Liverpool. He would be at Riddle Manor shortly. He threw up again.

- - -

The Daily Prophet the next morning was filled with stories of the Death Eater attack on the World Cup camp ground. This necessitated an explanation from Larry and Selene about the Death Eaters and how they carried out Voldemort's orders. A quick fire-call to Molly Weasley and the children were off to her house. Both Larry and Selene had to be at work today. The Weasleys had come back early from the Quidditch cup. Harry and Selene got first hand accounts of what happened.

- - -

"Hold your hippogriffs! I'm coming!" Sirius almost fell down the stairs. It was too early to be up. Dobby had waken him up, telling him someone was knocking at the door. He had stumbled out of bed and pulled on a robe.

They had had a little party last night, Remus, Hestia, Tonks, and him. They had listened to the Quidditch match and drank wine. Or it had started with wine. Then Remus and he had taken shots each time a goal was made. Then the game was over, and they sat around with the girls talking and doing a lot of laughing, he recalled. Later Hestia and Tonks had left, and he and Remus had toasted -- well, just about everything. He didn't even recall going to bed.

He rubbed his eyes again, and opened the door.

"Cissy?" he gasped.

"Sirius, do you remember that offer you made after you were released? I've left Lucius, and need a place to stay."

"Yes, of course. Come on in. Welcome, Draco. Stay as long as you like. Dobby! Get the bags. Make up a couple of guest rooms. Narcissa and Draco will be staying for a while."

"Probably a week for me," Draco said.

"Why?"

"September 1st. The Hogwarts express?"

"Oh, yes. How time flies. Have you eaten yet? Then Dobby will make us all some breakfast. Draco, why don't you go wash up for breakfast.

"So, Cissy. What happened?"

"Did you hear about what happened last night?"

"Just that the Irish won, but Krum caught the snitch."

"No, afterward. Some," she paused, "people decided to dress in black robes, put on white masks, and harass the Muggles. I can't prove that Lucius was one of them, but I can't disprove it, either. Of course he won't say.

"Siri, we're not children any more. I have a child of my own. I don't want him part of that, whether You-Know-Who comes back or not. You know he likes that Muggleborn Ravenclaw you have at your Boxing Day parties. I'd rather he marry in his own circles, but I'm not going to stand in the way of his happiness.

"And can you imagine the world that they would make if they won? A world of cruelty, and slavery, and torture, and death. And if He came back and won? Not even his own followers would avoid being on the receiving end of the Cruciatus.

"Oh, Sirius, there are so many reasons!"

"I know. Relax. You and Draco are welcome here, and you can stay as long as you like."

"Thanks, Siri."

"There is one condition. You don't use my nickname ever again."

- - -

"Master! Master! I made it! I'm here!"

"Good. Get in here, and start stirring."

"You! You're dead!"

"And you were one of the Gryffindor clique. If the Master hadn't told me to expect you, I would have killed you on the spot. I bet you don't even have the mark."

"I do. At first the Master thought it would be better if I wasn't marked, but he marked me right before, er, the Godric's Hollow thing. But how did you survive? I thought you died years ago in Azkaban?"

"Yes. My dear, deluded parents helped me escape. Watch out, I have to add the Mandrake now. Keep stirring. I've been doing it for hours. I'm going to take a nap. Don't stop stirring!"

"What about that?"

"Just some Muggle. You knew you had to make the master a homoculus. Didn't you check the instructions? It works best when done under a gallows. Not having a gallows, we made one. Now stop bothering me, and keep stirring! I'll be back for the next step in an hour."

"Yes, Barty."

"That's Mr. Crouch to you, Pettigrew!"

- - -

Welcome! Welcome!"

"Hello, Sirius," Selene said, stepping out of the fireplace, following Harry and Luna. Luna helped Harry off the floor. Larry appeared in the fireplace a moment later.

"Thank you for the invitation. It was rather sudden, wasn't it?" Larry asked.

Sirius smiled, and said, "I just wanted to keep a bit of a party atmosphere around the old place. Come on in and say hello to my other guests."

"Other guests?"

"Draco!" Harry exclaimed.

"Hello, Narcissa," Selene said.

"Please, you can call me Cissy."

After dinner, Draco, Luna, and Harry went to the first floor sitting room, while the adults were in the main floor parlor.

"They'll talk for a while, but I don't know how long," Draco said.

"What are they talking about?" Harry asked.

"I don't know what they'll talk about with your parents, but we've had guests almost every night since we've been here. Pansy Parkinson and her family one night. Blaise Zabini and his mother another. Daphne Greengrass and family last night. It's a regular Slytherin meeting hall."

"Why?" Luna asked.

"Mother and Uncle Sirius are sounding them out. They think that You-Know-Who was behind the attack at the World Cup. Mother doesn't want to be associated with the Death Eaters any more, and wants to see what allies she can make among the other Slytherin families. But, of course, they aren't learning too much."

"Why 'of course'?" Harry asked.

Draco smiled. "They're Slytherin. They don't want to give away their position in case Mother is really working for You-Know-Who or the Ministry. Either way, they don't want to expose themselves."

Harry mused, "That must be a pain, not being able to say what you want."

"That's why Slytherins do so well in politics."

Later, Sirius took Harry to one of the unused bedrooms. "Harry, have you done any more practicing on your transformation?"

"Yes, watch!" He changed his right arm into a large, whitish-gray, rhinoceros leg and foot. He changed it back.

"Oh! That feels so weird when only part of your body is changed. But that's almost it. I've changed everything except my head, and Remus told me not to try that unless someone was around."

"Want to try? I can turn you back if you succeed and have trouble." Harry concentrated, went through the animagus meditations, and tried to change his head into a rhino's. It didn't work. After ten minutes of trying they gave up.

"I'll visit you at Hogwarts. We can keep trying."

"How will you get in?"

"I know a few secret entrances. I'll owl you before I show up."

"Alright, but don't get in trouble. We can always try over the holidays."
"Don't worry about me."

- - -

"Do you have any phrases that you regularly use when speaking to Dumbledore that he would notice if you didn't use?"

"Constant Vigilance."

"How do you say it?"

"CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

"Do you ever say it without shouting."

"During conversations. If it seems appropriate, I'll shout it at the end of the conversation."

"How's he doing? Do you need more truth potion yet?"

"Shut up, Wormtail, he's still good for another half hour."

"Is there anyone else you would recognize at the castle?"

The two Lovegood children and Neville Longbottom."

"And why would you know them?"

"I tutored them over the summer."

"Describe what you taught them."

"I concentrated on defensive spells, some dueling, and dodging. And general review for Neville since he had a new wand that was more compatible."

"Specifically, which spells did you teach them."

The interrogation of Alastor Moody went on, hour after hour, day after day.

- - -

"Good morning Harry. Ready to go back to school?"

"Morning, Aunt Selene. Yes, I think so."

"Is there a problem, dear?"

"Just that my head hurts. And I don't think I slept well last night. I had nightmares."

"I'm sorry to hear that. It wasn't about going to the wrong class, was it? Good morning, Luna."

"Good morning, Mum. What are you talking about?"

"Harry had a nightmare. I remember a number of times I had bad dreams about going to the wrong classes the night before starting a new school year."

"That doesn't sound too bad, Mum."

"These are dreams, remember, so it wasn't just going to the wrong class once. I remember one dream where it was right before final exams and I realized I had been in the wrong class the whole year and there wasn't any time to learn the course work before the test. That sort of thing can happen in a dream, you know. And, of course, the emotion is real."

"OK, Mum. Just don't remember that when I get my grades. I might use it as an excuse."

"I expect good grades from you, little lady. You too, Harry."

"Yes, Aunt Selene." "Harry, your curse damage looks bigger."

"Could that cause my head to hurt?"

Luna looked at her mother. Selene shrugged.

"Ok, I'll just get some aspirin," he said. "No. You two eat. I'll get the aspirin. Then we'll check your trunks, and get you on that train. And where is my husband?" she asked, leaving the kitchen. Luna said,

"I don't like this."

"You don't like this? I'm the one in pain."

"Yes, but it's never hurt you before. I think something has happened."

"But unless we hunt Voldemort down, I'm not sure we can tell."

"We'll see if the aspirin works. If not, we'll think about our next move."

"All right, Luna."

- - -

"Harry?"

"Hello, Hermione." She had opened the train compartment door on the Hogwarts Express compartment where Harry was sitting with some friends. She was extremely nervous about this. She had spent most of the train ride screwing up her courage to do this.

"I just wanted to apologize for what happened on the train ride home. I stuck my nose where it didn't belong, and I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted. Thanks."

"See you at the feast!" She felt immensely relieved. The build up was worse than the actual event.

"What was that about?" Mike Daly, who was sharing the compartment with Harry and several other third year boys, asked.

"Just a minor fight. But it's over now, and I'm not going to talk about it."

"But Hermione Granger acknowledging that she made an error! That's got to be a first!"

"Drop it," Harry said sternly. "It took a lot of courage for her to do that, so let it drop."

"Yes, sir! So, this year we won't have to teach basic wand movements to the first years, right? It will be the second years' job, correct?"

"Exactly. And while they're doing that the first week, before the study group gets really started, we'll be outside playing spell tag."

"Excellent!"

- - -

After the food disappeared from the Welcoming Feast, Dumbledore got up to speak. He gave the usual warnings about casting spells in the halls, items that can't be used on the school grounds ("I don't even know what a Fanged Frisbee is," Harry whispered to Mike), and how the Forbidden Forest is still forbidden. "

And as those of you who were in Divination know from your Class List letter, Professor Trelawney has left to pursue other opportunities, and we will not be teaching Divination."

Then he dropped the bomb.

"And it is my sad duty to inform you that there will be no Quidditch House Cup this year." There were groans, exclamations of disbelief, and shocked looks, like the one on Harry's face. Dumbledore went on to announce the Triwizard Tournament. He did not go into much detail, and was interrupted when the doors of the Great Hall crashed open.

"Ah," he said, looking at the black cloaked figure in the doorway, "Our new Defense against the Dark Arts instructor has arrived!" Every eye was fixed on the figure that walked into the Great Hall leaning on a staff and giving a dull clunk with every other step. Halfway into the hall, he threw back his hood.

Dumbledore announced, "May I present Professor Moody!"

Luna looked puzzled, and whispered to Harry, "That's not Mad-Eye."

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AN: Note on chapter 15. For more information on Jakalopes, see the thread on the . Usenet group starting with message id: 38AE708A dot 4b25addf at excite dot com.

Convert the dots to real periods, and the at to a real at sign when searching.

Also, I was using the calendar for sixth year given at the hp-lexicon site. It was only as I reached the end of the Summer that I realized that it was based on the JKR "September 1st is a Monday every year" theory of time. At which point I decided not to go back and try and fix it.

I want to thank my beta-readers swordchucks and Wombat. Thank them for a much better story.

Chapter 16

The Goblet of Fire

After the opening feast the Ravenclaws gathered for their traditional start of term meeting. They filled in the first years on the resources available to them as Ravenclaws. Todd Larson, a second year, invited the entire first year to the wand movement class. Hermione gave a brief introduction to the inter-house study group that met in the Great Hall starting the next week. Roger Davies complained briefly about the lack of Quidditch, but promised regular practices so the team would be ready for next year.

And they talked about the new instructor, Alaster "Mad-Eye" Moody. A look and small shake of her head from Luna kept Harry quiet. Hermione mentioned some things she had read about Moody in the books of recent Wizarding History. Cliff Marsland, whose mother was an Auror, relayed what he had heard about the retired Auror. The meeting then broke up, and Harry brushed Luna's hair.

"Alright, if he's not Mad-Eye, he's a good imitation. What makes you think he's not?"

"His aura. And he's always got these protection spells up, but not tonight. He's not Mad-Eye."

"If he's not Mad-Eye, then who is he? And how does he look exactly like the real one."

"That's easy: magic."

"I know that. You can't dress up that good and look like someone. But what kind of magic will do that?"

"I don't know." They were quiet for a while.

Harry asked, "Why didn't you want to tell anyone about him not being Mad-Eye?"

"Well, there's more than one reason why someone would impersonate someone else, right?"

"He could have murdered the real Mad-Eye."

"You don't need to impersonate someone you murdered. You murder someone you need to impersonate. Sometimes. But aren't there other reasons for impersonating someone?"

Harry thought for a moment and said, "Well, if Mad-Eye needed to do something, and prove that he couldn't have done it."

"That's good. I was thinking that he was just late, and didn't want to embarrass himself."

"That seems like a lot of trouble to not embarrass yourself."

"I suppose. But anyway, we don't know the reason he's not here, so let's keep the secret for a while. After all, we have secrets and we're not doing anything wrong by keeping them."

Harry nodded, and handed Luna the brush back. "And when certain fourth years found out, we were quite upset. Fine, we'll keep the secret. But he better be a good teacher, or I go to Dumbledore. And if he does anything wrong, we tell, too."

Luna nodded at that, then asked, "Do you think we should warn Neville? He's probably the only student with enough experience with Mad-Eye to tell the difference."

"If we're going to keep this a secret," Harry answered, "then we better. Otherwise he'll say something when the fake Mad-Eye acts out of character."

"We'll tell him tomorrow."

- - -

The next day they didn't see Neville in the morning. They had Care of Magical Creatures with Professor Hagrid. The large man showed

them Skrewts, but didn't have much information on them. It seemed that the students had to figure out what they were. The small number of Ravenclaws in the class thought it was fun, until they realized that Hagrid didn't know either. There were a few unpleasant remarks said among the students. Mike Daly, who was taking the course with Harry and Luna, mentioned that the students the year before started with Hippogriffs.

The second class of the morning was Defense Against the Dark Arts. As Harry and Luna entered, the fake Mad Eye nodded to them. Luna smiled and waved back. Harry just nodded. The class was fascinating. He demonstrated the three Unforgivables. He gained a lot of respect from the Ravenclaws, and everyone was talking about it. It seemed he didn't just do it for the third years. There had only been two classes with the new professor, but lunch was buzzing with news about them. Luna didn't join in the enthusiasm, though.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, passing her a serving dish filled with vegetables.

"Those spells. They were mostly black. The Imperious had some mind magic in it, and the Cruciatus had body magic, but they were mostly black. And the killing curse -- it was all black. I" she paused as she tried to put her thoughts in words. "I felt dirty just being around them."

Harry dropped his voice. "Do you feel that way around me?" He made a little gesture at his head.

"Oh, no. Your aura is so bright! That just a little dirty spot. And until right before school started it was only getting smaller, so I know someday it will be gone."

Harry nodded, feeling relieved.

"But I'm starting to wonder about the man teaching us defense."

"We'll watch him."

That evening, Harry had another encounter with the fake Moody. Harry had hung around after dinner to make sure that the second years were going to teach the first years, then went out to join the spell tag game that the third and fourth years were going to organize. The Weasley twins thought it would be funny to cast some spells on the participants without joining in the fun. When they were discovered, they were thoroughly hexed.

After the game the mixed group of students was heading through the courtyard when they were accosted by a group of Slytherins. Theodor Nott, Greg Goyle, Vincent Crabbe, Blaise Zabini, and a couple of fifth years that Harry didn't know were sitting around talking until they noticed Draco.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Blood Traitor," Nott said.

Harry slipped his wand out of his pocket, keeping it hidden from the older boys. Draco saw the action, and shook his head.

He responded to the taunt, "What are you on, about, Nott? Still mad because you couldn't join your father in some Muggle torture at the World Cup?"

"My father has an alibi. He was with your father. You, however, don't. You weren't with your father; and I hear you were even tossed out of your own house."

"If I'm a Blood Traitor, like you said, I don't need an alibi. Or did you forget what you were accusing me of? Our resident expert on religion," he indicated Mike Daly, "says that religion has a stupefying affect on its adherents. Maybe your belief in the Dark Lord is making you stupid? When you finally engage your brain and think through what you want to accuse me of, let me know." He headed into the castle. Harry started to follow when he caught Nott moving out of the corner of his eye. He pushed Draco out of the way as a spell sped past. He turned and whipped up his wand.

"Stop right there!" a voice bellowed. The fake Moody appeared, waving a wand with his fake eye spinning, taking in the whole courtyard.

"You!" he shouted, pointing at Nott. "You sniveling coward! Hexing someone when their back is turned? Just like your Death Eater father! I ought to have your expelled!"

"You can't!"

"I can! I don't care who you are, or what your family has paid the Minister, I'll expel anyone I catch hexing another student in the back! That goes for everyone! I will not have it! All right there, son?" That last was directed at Draco.

"Yes, sir."

"Good reflexes there, Lovegood."

"Thank you, sir."

"You!" he pointed his wand at Nott again. "Get inside. We have things to discuss with your head of house."

With that, he marched Nott into the castle at wandpoint. The other Slytherins slinked away quietly, apparently deciding not to test their luck twice in one day.

"What was that about?" Harry asked.

"After the pseudo-Death Eater attack at the World Cup, my Mum took me and left my father. She thinks he's going to start doing Death Eater activities, and doesn't want to be involved. Now I don't have to keep talking about blood purity and all that rot, and Nott thinks I've changed my mind about all that."

"Well, you did, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but that was a long time ago. I haven't thought like that for years. It's just now I feel safe enough to not pretend."

Harry chuckled. He turned to Mike, "And what did he mean when he said you were the resident expert on religion?"

"Unlike most wizards, I have faith, and I'm part of a church."

"How's that work?"

"Weird at first. But my Dad said that the church teaches that there can't be a contradiction between faith and reason, and when there is, either the reasoning is wrong, or you don't understand our faith. So we researched it and came to the conclusion that since I'm obviously not selling my soul to the devil to get these powers, that this magic must be part of the natural world and probably an unknown branch of science. In which case, it's just a tool for understanding the world. And tools aren't good or evil in themselves; but only in how you use them."

Draco thought about this, and asked, "So this all came about after you got your Hogwarts letter?"

"Nah. He did the research back when he found out my mother was a witch. He just helped me go through it, so I would understand."

Since they had come in through the courtyard entrance, they didn't need to break up right away. They walked together until they finally reached a stairway where the Ravenclaws generally used to get between their tower and the dungeons.

"See you in Runes tomorrow, Mike! Good night Draco," Harry said, as they said as they went their separate ways.

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Runes turned out to be an interesting class. It was the basics of enchantment -- creating magic objects that held their magic for a long time, as well as wards -- the . It was, essentially, a different class of magic from wand magic. As Professor Ransom explained, potions, too, was a different type of magic from basic wand magic. And while it was true that you could, theoretically, do everything with your wand that you do with runes or potions, in practical terms you used potions and runes for those things that are easier to do with potions and runes. And in fact, there was magic that could be done with runes

(and potions) for which there was no wand spell the currently existed. In some cases, it was theorized that it would be impossible to simulate some rune and potion effects with spells, though proving that something couldn't be done was always a tricky prospect.

The complications arose since runes, like a human language, had rules for how they could be put together. Many combinations were meaningless, and other combinations didn't make sense due to construction or interactions that weren't obvious.

He did recommend the Rune puzzle in the Quibbler for practice and to help the students familiarize themselves with more runes than they would encounter in the class.

Luna was positively beaming when class let out. Anyone who praised her father's paper was intelligent in her book. Harry left happy, because he felt good when Luna was happy.

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Arithmancy with Professor Vector was interesting. Here was a class where the Muggleborn regularly did better, at least initially, than those from wizarding households. Muggle children usually had more mathematics instruction. And while Arithmancy was closer to Algebra and Calculus (although they wouldn't be getting that complex even in seventh year), the basic manipulation of numbers and symbols was a prerequisite that most wizard raised children weren't taught to the degree that Muggles of the same age were. Selene, being a spell wright, knew this, and made sure Luna and Harry were well versed in mathematics as a part of their pre-Hogwarts education. Harry felt good knowing that all that work would pay off. He also felt good knowing that his surrogate mother cared.

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Monday evening, the second week of school, found five years worth of students in the Great Hall for intra-house study sessions. When Harry and Luna returned to the Great Hall after getting their study materials from the Ravenclaw tower, they found that the room had been re-arranged. Instead of four long tables that ran most of the

length of the room, there were now eight tables, most of the width of the room. Professor McGonagall was the teacher/supervisor that evening, and she informed them that there was one table per year, and one extra table for non-study purposes. When McGonagall was the study hall monitor, the people who played games had to be extra quiet.

Harry liked the new arrangement, and thought he'd like it if meals were sometimes served with this seating arrangement.

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Classes continued, and the Fake Moody was still teaching. Luna, Neville, and Harry were the only ones who seemed to know that it wasn't the real Moody. They discussed it after classes one day. They decided, as long as he didn't do anything that was dangerous, and seemed to be teaching well (they admitted that he was better than Lockhart, and Neville said he was better than Quirrel), they wouldn't say anything. They were going to watch him very carefully. None of them felt that this was a situation that should go on much longer, but none of them could come up with a specific thing the Fake Moody had done wrong.

They continued to watch and wait.

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"Killed by a rampaging cockatrice. Took all three headmasters to corral it."

Harry was brushing Luna's hair in the Ravenclaw common room. A group of seventh years were sitting around sharing stories of how various previous champions of the Triwizard Tournament had died.

"Yes, but it only killed one. In 1739 two students were killed trying to detrap a box that held the clue to the second task. The remaining student was declared the winner, even though he had only finished one of the tasks. The two headmasters of the schools whose student died tried to insist that he open the box before the prize was awarded. The other three judges disagreed, and Beauxbatons won that year."

"You think that's bad," another said, "In 1774 the Headmaster of Durmstrang died. They figured he was cheating and helping his student. They tried to institute a magical oath after that to keep the judges honest, but they couldn't agree on the wording, and nothing changed. Are you sure you want to put your name in Liz?"

Elizabeth Ragingstorm the seventh year prefect, nodded and answered, "Yes. I don't want to die, and I hope forewarned is forearmed"

"And four arms is an odd number of arms for anyone," said several people at once.

"But I would think that if the tournament was ended because too many people were dying, that they'd try to remedy that when they restarted it. I don't expect anyone to die. And if I'm the champion, well, I still don't expect anyone to die, but especially me."

Luna asked Harry, quietly, "Would you like to compete in the tournament?"

"Me? Are you kidding? All we've learned about in Care of Magical Creatures is that Screwtts don't seem to like anything we've tried to feed them. That wouldn't help much, even on the off chance that we had to face them in an arena. I'd have no idea how to fight a cockatrice."

"Dance."

"Huh?"

"Remember that Paul Bunyan story when the monsters attacked the camp during the winter of the Blue Snow? One of the creatures was a cockatrice, and that lumberjack just kept dancing to avoid the poison spines it flung at him. Once the spines are all thrown, you rope it, hop on it's back and tame it like a wild horse."

Harry looked at her. He remembered the story, vaguely. "You know, for some reason I don't think that's the way a wizard would go about it. I, for one, have no experience taming wild horses."

"That would be a drawback. So you don't want to compete?"

"Oh, sure, it would be exciting to dream about, but we're only third years, and these problems are designed to be difficult for someone in seventh year. No, I think I want to be an armchair Seeker for this one. Let someone else face the danger."

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"Yes, what is it," Snape snapped. The door to his classroom opened to show one of the younger students. A Ravenclaw. How typical. He had just dismissed the last class of the day, and now one of the brats wanted more.

He was no longer on probation but he knew he was still in the spotlight. If he went back to the old ways, he'd be fired very quickly. Some days he just wasn't sure if it was worth it.

"Professor Snape, Hermione Granger said that there was a potion that could make you look like someone else. Since you know everything there is to know about potions, I came to ask you about it?"

"And why would you be interested in such a potion? This isn't another adventure like the one that blew up the Great Hall is it?"

"Oh, no. It's just a bet I have with Harry. We were arguing about the story of Merlin making Uther look like Igraine's husband. He thought magic could make it work, but I thought that even if he looked exactly like Gorlois she should have figured it out. But then neither of us know about the properties of the potion Hermione said would do it, so that's why I'm asking you."

Snape studied the blond with the large, silvery eyes. Some times she came across as flighty, and sometimes she seemed to have a depth about her. Her cousin seemed to keep her on track in his class,

though, and that's all that mattered. But the best way to get rid of her now would be to just answer her question.

"The potion Miss Granger was probably talking about is Polyjuice potion. And I mentioned it in class last year when we were talking about the properties of lacewing. It requires a bit of the person you are changing into so I wonder how Merlin could have gotten that ingredient if indeed this is how it was done. The other drawback is that it only lasts an hour, and the potion takes a month to brew."

"Only an hour? That would make it difficult, since the stories say he spent the whole night with her. Could he have taken more before it wore off?"

"That is possible, but hardly probable."

"Considering what they were doing, I would think not! But it wouldn't make him act like Gorlois, would it? I would think that if they spent the whole night she would have noticed something odd about his behavior? Not using their pet name, or something?"

"Indeed, you may be correct, Miss Lovegood. But then, perhaps with the passage of years, the story has changed a bit, and we can no longer rely on the details to be accurate. After all, if he had spent only as long as it takes -- and I can't believe I'm having this conversation with a student. This is highly inappropriate, Miss Lovegood, and I suggest you continue the discussion with Madam Pomfrey. Good day." He picked up his bag filled with homework scrolls from the last class and hurried out of the classroom. There had been an incident, before he was in school, of a teacher taking inappropriate liberties with a student. With his reputation, he didn't need anything like that even being whispered about.

As he made his way into his suite of rooms a thought struck him. Could it be that Miss Lovegood fancied him? He shuddered. He would have to watch out for that girl, and under no circumstances would he allow himself to be alone with her again.

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"It could be Polyjuice Potion, Harry," Luna said as they made their way to Defense class.

"But it doesn't explain everything. He's very good at imitating Moody, but he has made a few mistakes. Moody wouldn't use anyone's first name, unless they were a friend. But the Fake Moody has done it numerous times. Even Neville caught that one."

"Yes, he's good, but not perfect. So if we can tell, we have to assume that Dumbledore can too, so he must be here with the Headmaster's permission. But then, what about the real Moody?"

"I don't know."

They entered the classroom, and took seats. Soon, the Fake Moody limped into the room and put a stack of parchment rolls on a desk near the door.

"Good work on the essays on the Cruciatus Curse. Pick up your essays on the way out. That completes your instruction on two of the three spells. Today we are going to do something different. It's pretty obvious that I couldn't demonstrate the other two curses on you. I don't need students writhing in pain, and if I used the Avada Kedavra spell on you, well, I'm here to teach you and it would be very difficult to teach you anything if you were dead. But I have permission from Dumbledore to test your ability to resist the Imperius curse. This is a terrible curse! People under its influence have been forced to kill their own friends and family! But you need to know! You need to learn to overcome it. Just about anyone could learn, given time, and that's part of what I'm doing, I'm giving you a chance to understanding the curse and what it takes to overcome it. You probably won't succeed today, but you will have tried! And if you are ever placed under this curse you will already have some idea of how to throw it off. Now make a line."

"Luna, is this crossing the line? He's going to cast an unforgivable curse on us!" Harry whispered to Luna as he got in line in front of her.

"He has Dumbledore's permission. We'll talk later." It was indeed hard to hold a conversation in class and make it unnoticeable to the

teacher and the rest of the students. They waited for their turn while Tom Lynch recited a poem, Larry Pohlen hopped around like a frog and Liz Ericson did cartwheels. Harry's turn came, and he slammed his legs against a desk while fighting the euphoria that the curse caused him. The Fake Moody praised him for fighting off the curse, and tried it again. This time Harry didn't move. Then it was Luna's turn.

She had to resist the Moody reinforced urge to dodge the black spell as it sped towards her when the Fake Moody intoned "Imperio." Her mind seemed to be floating, and she felt that every care in the world was of no concern to her. A voice told her to act like a bird. She liked birds, she wasn't doing anything wrong, so she flapped her arms, and started tweeting. A small voice in the back of her head told her to stop, but she ignored it. Then the spell was removed.

She was standing on a desk, her arms outstretched. And for the first time in her life, she felt ashamed and embarrassed.

She was, by nature or by nurture, not a person who cared what most other people thought of her. She did care what she thought of herself, though. And here she was, out of her own control and there was nothing she could do about it. She knew she had flaws, but they didn't bother her. Here was a flaw that did. She had failed. She almost ran from the room as the bell rang. Harry grabbed his bag and went after her.

He saw her disappear around a corner that they would take if they were heading back to the Ravenclaw tower. He followed at a run, leaving the rest of the class behind. Half of them were heading straight to the Great Hall anyway.

He caught up with Luna on the fourth floor, and directed her to an empty classroom, sat, and pulled her on to his lap, wrapping her with his arms.

"What's wrong, Luna?" he asked, tenderly.

"I couldn't stop myself. I wasn't in control."

"That's what that spell is all about. Controlling other people."

"But not me! I don't want to be controlled!"

"That's why it's unforgivable. People shouldn't be controlled like that."

"But you weren't. You're strong enough to throw it off."

Harry paused a moment, and said, "I think I've had a lot of practice."

Luna looked at him for the first time during the conversation. "Who? Who put you under the Imperious?"

Harry shook his head. "The Imperious isn't the only way to control someone. Before you rescued me, those people," (he hadn't said the Dursley's name in years), "tried to make me think I was a freak that nobody wanted. They almost succeeded, but I think a little praise at school changed things. They might have still succeeded if I hadn't been rescued." He gave her a squeeze. "If we only knew who it really was, we could ask for special lessons on overcoming the Imperious."

"That's what I wanted to tell you in class, but didn't want to say with other people around. If he really had permission to put us under the Imperious, then I think we can trust him enough to give us extra lessons. But I want to make sure that Dumbledore really did give him permission to do it."

Harry nodded. "Alright, here's the plan. We get our stuff for the afternoon classes since we're almost at the tower, we eat, and we talk to the professors at lunch time, provided Dumbledore is there; that way we can see his reaction without letting Fake Moody think we're suspicious of him."

"He does shout Constant Vigilance enough, though, so he should be proud that we are being vigilant about him," Luna said with a smile. Her smile caused Harry to smile, too. He gave her a special kiss. They broke reluctantly.

"Do we have to go to lunch?" Luna asked. Her stomach took that moment to answer, and she looked down and said, "Traitor!"

They entered the Ravenclaw common room, and noticed a table covered with books and parchment, and a sign that said, "History of Triwizard Tournament Project. See Ragingstorm if interested." There were two seventh years working at the table.

"What's all this," Harry asked one.

"We're writing a book. We noticed we were doing all that research, and decided to put it to good use. If it gets published, we share the royalties. If not, we were having fun doing this anyway. For example, did you know that in 1186, the second tournament, the Durmstrang champion died falling into a spiked pit that the Beauxbatons' student had built to try to capture the dragon that was the first task? The Durmstrang headmaster tried to complain, but it turned out that he was the one who not only proposed capturing the dragon as a task, but insisted on it when the other headmasters tried to get something a little less dangerous. That was the first death."

"Wow. Catching a dragon! They don't fool around, do they?"

"After an incident with a cockatrice, though, they no longer allowed free roaming monsters as tasks in the tournament."

Harry told them, "Good luck," and swapped out his books for the afternoon classes. He rejoined Luna in the common room, and they went to lunch. Fake Moody and Dumbledore were at the professors' table. Harry and Luna ate quickly. There was some discussion about the third years that had been placed under the Imperious; the other students were wondering if they too would get the same treatment. A few older Ravenclaws (who got the most accurate story) congratulated Harry for throwing off the curse.

After eating quickly, (probably a little too quickly,) Harry and Luna walked up to the teacher's table. Fake Moody was getting up, presumably to go get something to eat (he never ate or drank in the Great Hall. Constant Vigilance, and all that.)

"Professor Moody," Harry said, loudly, as he reached the table. "We were wondering if you would give Luna some private lessons on throwing off the Imperious curse."

Dumbledore looked at the Fake Moody and he didn't look grandfatherly at all.

"Alastor? You used the curse on third years?"

"We talked about this, Albus. They have to know! And Mr. Lovegood here can throw off the curse. The Ministry should know that, so they can recruit him."

"That's immaterial. We talked about you demonstrating it on the NEWT students, not on every student in the school."

"I didn't use it on the first years. . . ."

"I'm glad you showed at least that much sense. But this stops now. There will be no more Unforgivables cast in this school. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir."

Dumbledore turned to the Lovegoods. "Your goal might be worthy, but your request is denied. You should get to class."

They mumbled "Yes, sir," and left. Out of the hall they started talking.

Harry began, "Okay, was that someone doing something wrong, or someone thinking it's easier to ask pardon than permission?"

"I don't know. Going under the assumption that Dumbledore knows that it's not the real Moody, then if he crossed the line, I would expect him to be gone fairly quickly. I wouldn't expect him to fire someone in front of people. That would go against all those "rules of managing people" that Daddy's always going on about when he has employee trouble."

"So if Fake Moody is gone, then he crossed a line, and we still don't know if Dumbledore knew or not. If he stays, same situation."

Luna sighed. "Unfortunately, true. It's time for Sir Tumulty's class. Nothing like a snide comment to keep our attention."

Harry chuckled. "I wonder if the writers have asked him for help? He's written a number of books. . . ."

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Fake Moody didn't leave, but no other class was put under the Imperious curse. Luna pouted a bit about not getting a chance to learn to throw off the curse, but Harry helped her get over it in some unused classrooms. The weeks passed fairly quietly until one lunch there was a crowd around the bulletin board.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, unable to see the board.

Ron Weasley squeezed out of the crowd and answered, "The other two schools are arriving Friday. Last class will be let out a half hour early, and we're going to go out and meet them. And the champions will be chosen during the Halloween feast. But best of all -- Potions gets cut! Yes!"

"Oh, Ron," Hermione said, as she joined them. "Here we are getting to meet students from other countries and all you can think about is missing class?"

"I can also think about that thousand Galleon prize money. I wish there were some way to get chosen."

"Ron," Harry said, "from what I can tell, in the last four hundred years that the tournament was run, it was rare to have all the champions survive. And while they may try to make it less deadly, they have history against them."

"Yeah, well, the thousand Galleons might make it worth it."

"If you were a survivor, and if you won. Two big ifs." The crowd shifted, and Harry was able to get closer. The sign said what Ron had relayed to them. He went into the Great Hall thinking about rampaging dragons.

"A thousand Galleons," he said to the other third years around him. "Considering what some of the tasks have been it isn't worth it."

"I'm surprised that Ragingstorm still wants to enter," Tom Towey added.

"Maybe she's not as Ravenclaw as we thought?" Don Bixler suggested.

"No, she's smart. Probably has some Gryffindor tendencies. We all have our failings," Harry commented, putting some chicken on his plate.

"I heard that, Lovegood!" came the voice of the prefect in question, threatening him with a dinner roll from her seat most of the way down the table.

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The halls were filled with stories of the Triwizard Tournament that week. The excitement kept building, and finally Friday afternoon arrived. Harry and Luna put away their books and joined everyone else outside to greet the other schools. The Beauxbatons' flying carriage was very impressive. Luna wanted to see the flying horses as soon as she could. Harry thought the ship rising from the waves was more impressive.

"The carriage I understand," He said to Luna as the Durmstrang students came up to the castle from the ship. "A featherlight charm or something similar, and the pegasi just need to fly themselves for the most part. But the ship! First they would need to make it watertight, then be able to sink it, then portkey it to this lake from where ever Durmstrang is, then move it through the whirlpool and direct it to shore. Some of it, I can understand, but the whirlpool? And then it

sailed to shore without sails or motors. At least I assume it has no motors."

"And they're Abraxans, not pegasi," Luna said, quietly, watching the Durmstrang group pass them into the castle. "And they used water elementals."

"Huh?" Harry asked Luna while other students were whispering about Victor Krum being among the Durmstrang students.

"They caused the whirlpool and pushed the ship to shore. Then they dissipated. You're probably right about the portkey. I assume since a ship is supposed to sit in the water and not leak that making the upper part not leak wouldn't be too hard."

"Ships aren't supposed to go underwater. I have a feeling it's a little trickier than just making the bottom not leak. No one goes in and out of the bottom of the boat."

They continued talking, Luna about putting doors and windows under the water line of the boat, and Harry half paying attention to her, and half directing her into the Great Hall. They found that the Beauxbatons students were sitting at the Ravenclaw table. It was mostly the older Ravenclaws who sat with them. The younger students generally sat quietly, listening. Harry and Luna did strike up a conversation in French with one of the Beauxbatons boys. He was from Paris and was grateful that Luna and Harry knew more French than he knew English. They told him about the castle while he told them about the palace that was Beauxbatons.

At the end of the feast Dumbledore got up and brought out the Goblet of Fire, the impartial judge that would choose the champions.

"Harry! Look at the Goblet!" Luna whispered.

"Looks old. Strange blue fire. What?"

"No. Wait." She waved her wand and cast the Mage-sight spell on him.

He covered his eyes with his hands, and gave a short exclamation. "Don't do that without warning me. Especially in here. I don't know why the ceiling doesn't blind you!" He carefully opened his eyes, holding up his hand to block the magic from the ceiling. He looked at the Goblet.

"Wow!" he whispered.

"Do you see all the runes?"

Shining through the Goblet were runes. The whole thing was awash in various magical colors. Something was wrong with the runes, though.

"They're backward!" he said, still whispering.

"They're inscribed on the inside. We're seeing them from the back, so to speak."

"Strange. All that magic, all those colors, but it's very still."

"Yes. I think it's waiting. I'm sure it will be a fountain of magical activity tomorrow."

"Just don't cast this on me without warning me."

"Sorry, Harry."

They watched as the Goblet was carried to the Entrance Hall, and later passed it while heading up to the Ravenclaw tower. They stopped, like lots of students were, and looked at it closer up. A glowing yellow torus surrounded the goblet.

"That's the age line Dumbledore put around it," Hermione said.

"I think we can get past it," one of the Weasley twins proclaimed.

"I'm sure Dumbledore has anticipated anything you can do," Hermione retorted.

"Then be down here for an early breakfast, and you'll see."

As they headed up to the Ravenclaw tower, Luna was quiet. When they got to the Ravenclaw tower a party was going on.

"What's happening?" Harry asked.

"They bought it!" one of the seventh years exclaimed, handing Harry a butterbeer. "We just got word that Red Books will be publishing the History of the Triwizard Tournament, edited by Elizabeth Ragingstorm, and filled with the various articles we wrote!"

"Congratulations!" Harry and Luna said. And said, and said, as they encountered various seventh year students.

"Aren't you going to congratulate me?" Hermione asked, when they encountered her.

"Why? Did you contribute to the book?" Luna asked.

"Yes. I wrote the article on the 1893 contest. No one died, but there was a lot of controversy about whether the tasks were too simple, since all the champions completed all of them. It seems that it was the bias of the judges that even allowed someone to be declared the winner, since by the accounts they all did really well. . . ."

"Sorry, Hermione, but can you tell us another time. I don't think I'll be able to brush Luna's hair tonight, so we'll have to do it in the morning, if that's alright with you, Luna?"

"That would be fine, Harry. Please wake up extra early, there's something I'd like your help with first thing in the morning."

"How early is early?"

"Seven."

"On a Saturday?"

"You can go back to bed afterwards."

"Fine. See you in the common room at seven."

"I love you."

"I love you, too." They shared a quick kiss, and went their separate ways.

"Luna, wait!" Hermione came up the stairs after her. "Why do you do that ever night?"

"Oh, family tradition."

"But you said he's a distant cousin or something. So far away that he's barely family."

"He's family because we decided to be family. That's all it takes, you know."

"I never thought about it like that."

"Goodnight, Hermione."

At seven the next morning Harry and Luna left the common room. The castle was quiet, and they made their way down quickly.

"I thought we were going to brush your hair this morning," Harry said.

"After breakfast. I have something I want to try before anyone else is around." They reached the entrance hall, and the Goblet was sitting on the sorting stool the same as it had been the night before. They saw Cedric Diggory heading down the corridor towards the Great Hall.

"Since you want me to warn you, consider yourself warned," Luna said, as she once more cast Mage-Sight on Harry.

"Watch, and give me a hand," she said, and cast a spell at the age line. Harry cast his assistance spell, and quickly made the color the same as hers. The line looked yellow to normal sight, but viewing the magic showed it was a very complicated ward that surrounded the

Goblet at the distance of the yellow circle, and extended to the top of the Goblet. Harry could see time, transformational, and motion magics twined throughout the ward field. And with his assist, Luna had just passed through all of them and dropped a paper into the Goblet. She left the wards, and undid her changes. They finished not a moment too soon, because Hermione and the twins came down the stairway from the Gryffindor tower direction.

"We got it!" one of the twins said. Hermione just rolled her eyes. A few other Gryffindors followed behind, including Ron.

They watched as the twins drank the aging potion, but only Harry and Luna saw that the magic started reacting to them the moment they crossed the ward line. The burst of magic that followed caused Harry to yelp in pain. He cancelled the Mage-site spell and saw Fred and George with long white beards laughing at each other.

"Told you so," said Hermione as she went towards the Great Hall.

"Luna," Harry whispered, "did you put your name in?"

"Of course not. I just wanted to prove I could bypass the wards. Nothing will come of it. I wondered why the transformation was part of the ward. If I had made a mistake, I'd be wearing one of those beards, too." She giggled at the mental image.

Harry didn't think about it again until that night when the Halloween feast was over and the Goblet was shooting out names. It seemed that no one was surprised when Victor Krum was chosen for Durmstrang. The pretty (and somewhat standoffish) Fleur Delacour was then chosen for Beauxbatons. Finally, the hall erupted in applause for Cedric Diggory. As Dumbledore was about to go join the champions, the Goblet's fire turned red again and spewed forth another piece of paper. Dumbledore caught the unexpected paper and read out --

"Harry Lovegood."

Harry was shocked. This couldn't be happening. He's only third year. This was impossible. He turned towards Luna and saw that she had gone pale (well, paler) and looked just as shocked as he did.

"Harry Lovegood. Please come up here!" Dumbledore called again. Harry found he was standing and walking towards the teachers table. The hall was quiet and everyone was looking at him. He headed towards the door that Dumbledore was indicating, and noticed that Dumbledore wasn't smiling. Harry felt like he was in a dream -- things were happening, and he didn't even have control of his own body.

The judges, Ludo Bagman, Bartimius Crouch, Olympe Maxime, the Beauxbatons headmistress, Igor Karkaroff, the Durmstrang Headmaster, and Professor Dumbledore, along with the four heads of house and Professor Moody, came in moments later.

"I didn't put my name in the Goblet!" Harry said, as soon as they were in. "Honestly, professor, I didn't do it. I don't want to be in the Tournament."

"Did you ask an older student to put in your name?"

"No I didn't. All I've heard for the past month is the horrible ways that Triwizard champions die. I don't want to do this! I'm only a third year, I can't compete."

Bagman seemed to be enjoying the confusion. "Well, his name came out of the Goblet. I think he's required to compete, right Barty?"

The other heads of schools complained about the unfairness of Hogwarts having two champions. Crouch seemed to be thinking deeply, and asked, "So you didn't put your name in the Goblet?"

"No, sir," Harry said vehemently. "I'm not lying."

"Then you can go. You cannot have a third party obligate someone else. That flies in the face of all man made and magical laws," Crouch said.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, as he started to leave. He noticed Luna standing inside the doorway. She looked relieved. As Harry walked towards her he doubled over in pain. He groaned, and fell to his knees.

"What's going on?" "What's happening to him?" and other words to that effect were being asked as Luna and Professor Sprout went over to him.

"It seems," Crouch said, "that he is indeed compelled by the binding magical contract to compete in the tournament. I don't know why, but it is."

"This means his earlier statement about not putting his name in the Goblet was a lie," Professor Snape said.

"No it wasn't," Luna answered, standing up. "I put his name in the Goblet. But it shouldn't have picked him! I wrote that his school was the Poppins Institute for Household Magic. There's no way that the Goblet should have chosen a student from that school."

"Why would you do that, Miss Lovegood?" Professor Flitwick asked.

"I just wanted to see if I could get past the age line. Neither Harry nor I wanted to be in the Tournament."

"And how did you accomplish that, my dear?" Dumbledore asked.

"That's not important. The questions are why did the Goblet choose a fourth champion, and why is he compelled to participate?" Crouch wanted to know.

Moody answered, "Someone must have cast a powerful Confundus Charm to bamboozle the Goblet into thinking there were four schools. That's a very powerful object, and it would take a powerful witch or wizard to do that. No third year could have done it.

"And as to why he has to compete -- a wife can sign a contract for her husband."

There was a shocked silence.

"Vous are married?" Fleur's voice broke the silence.

"They've been magically bound for as long as I've known them," Moody said.

Harry saw Luna pale again. He turned angrily at Moody.

"And how long is that? You're not the same man who taught us this summer! He ate and drank with us, although he always kept a flask of pure water with him. What's in your flask? Polyjuice potion?"

"Lovegood, you're getting delusional," the Fake Moody said, turning away from Harry. Harry pulled his wand and cast a silent stunner at the fake former Auror. Before anyone could stop him, he grabbed the flask and opened it. It smelled awful.

"Here, see for yourself," he handed the flask to Dumbledore. He sniffed it and handed it to Snape.

"That's Polyjuice," he confirmed. "Wait! She was asking about Polyjuice last month. This may all be part of an elaborate hoax."

"If it was a scheme, would I be turning him in?" Harry asked, exasperated.

"Mr. Lovegood," Dumbledore asked, "if you knew that this wasn't the real Professor Moody, why didn't you tell anyone?"

"We thought you knew. We thought if we could tell the difference, then you should be able to," Harry answered.

"And if you knew he was fake, then you probably had a good reason to keep it quiet, so we weren't going to tell anyone," Luna put in.

"Excuse me a moment, Professor," Crouch said to Dumbledore, and left the room.

"Does anyone remember when Moody last took a drink from his flask?" Dumbledore asked.

"Some time during dinner," Snape answered.

"Then it shouldn't be long," Dumbledore said, levitating the fake Moody into a chair and binding him to it with ropes.

"Severus, have you any Veritaserum?"

"I'll go get some, headmaster," he answered, and left.

As they waited McGonagall came over to the Lovegoods. Harry stood next to, but not touching Luna. She had recovered from the shocks, and seemed content to wait with the others for the Polyjuice to wear off.

"What did he mean, you're married?" McGonagall asked.

"That's no one's business but ours," Harry answered, a bit more angrily than he intended.

"Don't take that tone with me, Mr. Lovegood. You're in a lot of trouble."

"Not as much as the Headmaster for letting a Death Eater teach class," Luna answered, dreamily.

"What? What are you saying?" McGonagall looked shocked.

"Since he's not here with the Headmaster's knowledge, then he's probably an enemy. With the reappearance of the Death Eaters at the World Cup it makes sense that he's probably one."

McGonagall went over to the unconscious form and checked the ropes.

"What did you do to him," Bagman asked Harry.

"Silent stunner. The real Mad-Eye Moody taught me how to do that this past summer."

"You might not do too badly in the tournament after all."

"I don't want to be in the stupid tournament!"

"Yet you are in it," was the reply. Harry gave Luna an angry glare. She shrunk back from him.

Snape returned and the wait continued. The Headmasters and Headmistress started arguing again about Hogwarts having two champions, despite what it said on the paper with Harry's name.

Cedric quietly moved next to Harry and asked, "So how are you going to compete?"

"Probably poorly," he answered bitterly. "And in front of the whole school, too. I wonder what's going on out there?" he asked, indicating the Great Hall. "I bet they're coming up with all sorts of theories about what's going on in here, each one crazier than the last."

Cedric snorted, "Probably. Do you think they've guessed that we're dueling it out to see who the real Hogwarts champion is?"

Harry laughed at that. "Or we're having the first task right now -- who can slay a dragon in the guest dining room first."

Further conversation on the topic was halted as the Fake Moody shook and returned to his own form. Harry didn't recognize the man.

Dumbledore looked around, "Where's Crouch?"

"He left about fifteen minutes ago," Luna offered helpfully.

"Minerva, Filius -- go find him," Dumbeldore ordered. They left. "Now, you," he said, addressing the bound man. "Anything to say?"

"Just that when the master returns you will all beg for death. Especially you!" he screamed, looking at Karkaroff. "You tried to save

your own life by turning in his other servants. He's going to take special care of you!"

"Dumbly-door, who iz this man?" asked Headmistress Maxime.

"This is Bartimius Crouch, Jr. He supposedly died in Azkaban a few years ago. He is a Death Eater."

"I am his most loyal Death Eater!"

"Administer the Veritaserum," Dumbledore said, quietly. Snape did, and they heard a fantastic tale. His father and mother had broken him out of Azkaban at the cost of her life as she died looking like him. His father had kept him a prisoner but he eventually broke the magical constraints that were holding him. It was the Imperius, and as he said in class, repeated castings allowed him to overcome it. What he hadn't mentioned was that it took him years. After he placed his own father under the Imperius, he had searched out his master, finding his spirit hiding in an old hideout. There, he fashioned a homunculus body for the spirit to inhabit, and he and Pettigrew were going to help with a ritual to make it human. He was going to steal the Longbottom boy -- something about his birthday and using his blood was important -- but Dumbledore had put a stop to his use of the Imperius curse.

Then his master had come up with another plan. It involved getting the Longbottom boy into the Triwizard Tournament. At some point, he wasn't sure when, the boy would be taken and used in the ritual. And then his master would be back in a real body, and then he, Crouch Jr., would be rewarded.

"Get the Aurors," Dumbledore said, turning away from him. Sprout nodded, and left.

"Wait! Where's the real Moody?" Harry asked.

"He's locked in his own trunk in my office!" Crouch answered, laughing.

"Thank you, Mr. Lovegood. It seems I've overlooked the obvious. Excuse me while I dismiss the children. That's something else I have overlooked. Shall I have your students wait for you, or return to their quarters?"

Maxime said, "Tu may send them back to the carriage. I weel talk to them there."

"Same with mine," said Karkaroff.

"Very well. Miss Lovegood, you should go back to your tower, too."

"I'd rather stay with Harry."

"No," Harry answered. "You should go. Don't wait up for me."

"But Harry. . . ."

"Just go!" Harry turned away from her, anger in his voice. She looked at him for a moment, and left. She didn't wait to hear what Dumbledore said; she went straight to the Ravenclaw tower.

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"Master, they have uncovered my son."

"Did he succeed?"

"No. Some students' prank interfered, so the Longbottom boy is not in the tournament. Some other student is. A third year."

"We shall see if the so called champions are suitable anyway. This should not hurt our plans very much. We shall have to vacate these premises, though.

"And Crouch? You are no longer useful to me. Avada Kadavra!"

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She got ready for bed, and went back to the common room, waiting in a quiet corner for Harry to return. She sat there for hours while the students gossiped and theorized what the "prank that turned serious and the plot that went wrong" were. And how was Harry Lovegood going to compete? And Liz Ragingstorm got a lot of condolences for not being chosen. But eventually, they all went to bed. And still Luna waited.

Then Harry came in. He didn't see her. Very few people had, during the evening, and those that had, had looked at her and left her alone.

"Harry?" Luna said.

"Not now. I'm going to bed," came the reply. He headed up the steps and didn't even look at her.

Luna went to her own bed and cried herself to sleep.

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Author Note: I want to thank my beta-reader Swordchucks for not only punctuation and spelling help, but sentence structure and noticing when I used the wrong name for one of the characters.

Chapter 17

Here There be Monsters

The next day chaos ruled Hogwarts. Not only were there four champions, and the fourth had gotten around the age limit, but an escapee from Azkaban had been captured right there at Hogwarts masquerading as Mad-Eye Moody. The real one was recovering in the Hospital Wing, and it was all some plot of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Of course, for every rumor that contained a bit of truth, there were half a dozen that had only a passing association with it, or in some cases, reality. Things weren't helped by the huge numbers of Aurors that were around the school at various times during the day, interviewing groups of students about their defense classes. Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic came by. He hadn't looked happy when he left; as a matter of fact, he had looked furious. That sparked a lot of rumors, too.

As it was Sunday, there were no classes. Harry didn't care at that point, though, and had it been a regular school day he would have skipped classes. He was up early after a night where he had trouble sleeping. Whenever he did fall asleep, he would awaken from some nightmare of fighting dragons or cockatrices or jackalopes. He made his way to the Great Hall very early to get something to eat. He was the only person in the Great Hall, which was as he wanted it. He was actually earlier than the six A.M. breakfast, so he had to wait a while before any food appeared. The wait didn't bother him, as he had brought a book to read. For Aunt Selene's "Classics" requirement he was currently reading the Odyssey. Six A. M. rolled around and he found that he wasn't that hungry. He just ate some toast and continued reading. After a few other students came in and started asking him questions, he left.

As he was passing through the Entrance Hall he met Mike Daily coming up the stairs from the Dungeons.

"You're up early," Mike greeted him.

"I feel like I'm up late. I don't think I got much sleep last night."

"So it's true? You're really one of the champions?"

"Yes."

"Cool!"

"Not cool. Not at all cool! Would you be up to fighting a dragon?"

"Is that what you have to do?"

"I don't know. All they said was that the first task was in three weeks and it would be a test of bravery and skill."

"So why do you think it's going to be a dragon?"

"Just looking at the worst of the possibilities. I figure if I expect the worst, I can only be pleasantly surprised when I only have to wrestle a griffin. Uh, Mike? Where are we going?"

Mike hadn't gone to the Great Hall, but had continued up the stairs in the Entrance Hall. They had moved through the castle and had come to a statue of a gargoyle. Harry recognized it as the way to the stairs that led to the Headmaster's office.

"Are you in trouble?" Harry asked.

"No. I'm going home for the morning."

"You can do that?"

"I can. It was part of the agreement my Dad made with Dumbledore for me to come here. I get to go home each Sunday for about a half day."

"Why'd he insist on that?"

"Religious reasons -- so I can go to church with my family. And, I have to say, I like visiting with my family. I can't imagine being away from them for as long as some of the kids here are."

"I guess I'm sort of used to it."

"That's too bad. But you're welcome to join me. We either have breakfast, go to church around 10 and have lunch or go to Mass at 8 and have a brunch around 10 or 11."

"Uh, no thanks. Maybe some other time."

"No problem. Well, I've got to go. See you later."

"See you, Mike."

Mike gave the password, "M&M's" and disappeared up the spiral staircase. Harry wondered off into the castle. He wanted someplace where he wouldn't be found or bothered. He thought he knew just the place.

Luna looked for him for most of the morning, but gave up at lunchtime, and just went back to her dorm, the common room being too noisy with rumors and questions.

Professor Flitwick sent another student to get her in the early afternoon. He escorted her to the headmaster's office. Standing on the rotating stairs she thought about the other students -- even some seventh years -- who did not know where the Headmaster's office was. She wished she didn't need to know. But then, so much would be different. She reached the door and was about to knock, when she heard the headmaster call her name and tell her to come in.

She entered to find her mother and father also in the round office. Her mother got out of her chair and gave her a big hug. All the emotions that had been running through her since the previous evening came pouring out, and she started crying in her mothers arms. Selene sat and held her tightly while she cried out.

"No one has seen Mr. Lovegood today, Headmaster," Professor Flitwick said.

"Where's Harry?" Larry asked.

"He is somewhere in the castle, Mr. Lovegood, but beyond that, I couldn't tell you. I fear that the events of last night were a trifle overwhelming for him," Dumbledore answered.

"You think?" Selene asked, sarcastically. "Being forced to participate in a dangerous contest designed for students much older and more experienced than him when he had no intention of signing up? I think that would be a bit overwhelming. Add to that a Death Eater and a kidnapped professor, and this has all the ingredients of overwhelming that you could want." She then quietly asked her daughter, "Luna, do you know where Harry might be?"

She shook her head, not looking at anyone.

"The headmaster has told us some of what happened. What we don't understand is why you would put Harry's name in the Goblet?"

"After we got past the age line, I wanted to prove to myself that we had, so I wanted to put in a paper. I knew Harry would ask if I entered myself, so I didn't put my name on it. But I didn't put a legal school on it, either. I could see magical symbols for the three schools in the Goblet! I knew it couldn't pick him! And I hoped to tell him after the feast that I had put his name in it. Whether I told him the school or not would have depended on how he reacted. I thought it would be funny."

Flitwick asked, "You could see the magic for the different schools in the Goblet?"

Luna nodded. Her mother said, "Luna has one of the most advanced instances of Mage-sight we've encountered. She's worked with the Department of Mysteries, and I know they are planning to offer her a position after she finishes school. But that's neither here nor there. Now we must worry about Harry."

"Headmaster," Larry asked, "are you sure there is no way for Harry to avoid competing?"

"Unfortunately not. Due to the nature of the bond between Harry and Luna, he is legally, but more importantly, magically required to participate. Now about that bound. . . ."

"It is no one's business except the family's," Selene said, icily. "Luna?" she got her daughters attention. "You don't have to, and probably shouldn't answer anyone's questions about that, do you understand? And if anyone harasses you about it, get a hold of me right away. It's bad enough that so much has come out; we don't want any more."

"I'm afraid that the press will not leave this alone."

"We will deal with the press," Selene said. "We are not totally without resources there." She looked to her husband, who nodded.

"Very well," said the Headmaster, "Miss Lovegood, if anyone does bother you, please feel free to come to me or your head of house." Luna nodded.

"If you can't find Harry, then we'll be going. But we will see him before too long."

"Visit any time," the headmaster said.

The family got up and moved to the door.

"You're not going to use my floo?"

Selene answered, still coldly, "No, I think we'll take the opportunity to talk with Luna while she escorts us to the Entrance Hall. Good day, headmaster."

Albus looked at the Charms professor, and said, "I don't think I'm their favorite person at the moment."

"Do you blame them, Albus? I've never seen that much emotion from that girl. She's always calm. She can be facing the worst insults the higher grades can dish out, or the hardest test of the year, but she's always calm. Now this? No wonder her parents are mad."

"What more could I have done? I could have put a guard on the goblet, but I would have probably used Barty Crouch as one of the guards; and it may have dissuaded students from putting in their names. And what's with that family, anyway? Speaking Parseltongue? Breaking wards!" He stopped talking suddenly.

Filius looked up, concerned. "What?"

"I bet they were the ones who changed the wards on the sign about the Chamber of Secrets. All this time, I thought it was the Weasley twins!"

"They were playing with wards back in their first year?"

"It doesn't surprise me that the Department of Mysteries is interested in her. I would guess it's interested in both of them."

"But where is Harry?" Filius asked.

For a moment Dumbledore had a strange expression on his face then it disappeared. "I'm sure he's hiding in the castle some place. If he doesn't show up for dinner, I'll get the House Elves to look for him."

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Harry didn't show up for dinner, but showed up in the kitchen around the same time. He was hungry. He didn't return to the Common room, either, until after curfew. Elizabeth Ragingstorm and the third year girls were waiting for him. She started.

"I could subtract points for you being out this late," she began.

"I'm not out. I'm in the common room."

"But you just came in."

"You didn't catch me out of our common room after hours."

"But if someone else had caught you. . . ."

"I don't care. Do you think after weeks of listening to how champions have died that I really care about house points? I just hope I live through the first task."

Elizabeth looked away.

"Harry. . . ." Luna began.

"Don't talk to me," was the reply, as he made his way towards his own dorm room.

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The days that followed were among the worst that Luna could remember. Harry wouldn't talk to her. He wouldn't stay around her in the common room or during the nightly study sessions in the Great Hall; he wouldn't sit with her in class; if she sat near him, he would move. She felt awful.

They had had fights before, but nothing like this. The time Harry had challenged her on the existence of Commatoot Ponies she had been furious, and didn't speak with him for a day. But neither Harry nor her father could remember hearing about them, and she had eventually apologized. She hadn't liked being wrong, but she had disliked the breach between Harry and herself even more. But this was a lot worse.

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Harry had spent Sunday in the Divination tower. The ladder was still keyed to him, and he had read the Odyssey for a while, moped until he couldn't stand it, then spent some time organizing Aunt Sibyll's clothes, which were still in the living area. He found a trunk and started folding them up and putting them away.

His appearance in the kitchen around dinner had stopped Dumbledore from sending a search party, but after getting some food he had retreated to the Divination tower again, and did some homework. When he finally went back to his dorm, he had the confrontation with Ragingstorm and snubbed Luna.

Overwhelmed was a good description of how Harry felt. He was overwhelmed by his own emotions. He was scared -- the research the Ravensclaws had done showed that almost half of the contestants died; he felt outclassed -- the other champions had looked so tall compared to him; he felt betrayed -- he didn't want to compete and was now being forced to; he felt embarrassed -- his bond with Luna was now public knowledge; he felt exposed -- hiding his real name was second nature, but (as Hermione proved) with research and logic people could discover his identity, and this might give people incentive to start digging; and that scared him even more now that they had proof, via Barty Crouch, Jr., that Voldemort was active. He felt that he would be unable to survive (let alone win) the Triwizard Tournament, never mind face the Dark Lord.

And while even he realized it was probably wrong, the focus of all these emotions was Luna. He couldn't seem to get past that. All these emotions just overwhelmed him.

Monday morning found him dodging questions in his dorm, in the bathroom, in the common room, in the Great Hall (which he quickly left and ate breakfast at a small table in a corner of the kitchen), and on the way to Potions class.

Outside of the classroom, he received a different reactions depending, for the most part, on the house. The Hufflepuffs actively ignored him. They turned their backs on him when they could, talked to friends on the other side of him as if he wasn't there, and gave him some dirty looks.

He partnered with Tom Towey, much to the disappointment of Luna, and ignored the Hufflepuffs glares as well as the Ravensclaws questions.

When he put too little of one ingredient in the potion and it only turned a light blue instead of a blue-green, Snape sneered and asked, "How do you expect to survive the tournament when you can't even make a simple stomach soother?"

Harry's answer put in concrete terms part of what he had been feeling, but hadn't admitted to himself.

"I don't. Sir."

Luna sucked in a breath. A few of the other students stared at him. Snape scowled and looked him in the eyes. Harry thought there was something strange in the look.

"Get back to work!" Snape snapped. Everyone who had been looking at Harry got back to work on their potions.

Defense was their next class, and was canceled. Moody hadn't yet recovered from his several months long captivity. Harry took the opportunity to disappear. He reappeared after lunch at Double Runes with the Slytherins. They practiced carving and worked on the theory of powering the runes. He kept his mouth closed unless the question directly related to class. Similarly in Arithmancy and in the classes the rest of the week. He didn't go to the evening study hall, nor did he go to any meals in the Great Hall.

The rest of the week was similar. He didn't eat in the Great Hall, and didn't study with anyone else. He did his work, but avoided everyone as much as possible. His roommates would try to speak with him when they saw him in the morning and at night. The first couple of nights Luna was waiting in the common room, but he wouldn't talk to her, either. She stopped trying after Wednesday. Her hair went back to it's former mess without Harry brushing it.

Harry received a letter from Selene and Larry, but after glancing at it, put it away and didn't read the whole thing. It was a plea from them to talk to Luna. He didn't read their reasons. He didn't want to talk to anybody.

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"Thank you for coming on such short notice, my friends. I felt I needed to touch base with you on recent events. Just to update you, the Minister is still insisting that Voldemort is dead, the Lovegoods are after my head, my counterparts on the other schools are quite upset that we have two champions, and the International thinks this was a bad idea. What happy news do you have for me?"

Albus Dumbledore looked over the assembled Hogwarts teachers. The meeting was in the Teacher's Lounge rather than his office. With the impromptu nature of the meeting he thought having it on their ground would be more politic.

"My house is quite upset with the Lovegood boy. I can't say I blame them." Pomona Sprout said.

Flitwick said, "Lovegood is pretty upset about the whole thing himself. He's been unresponsive in class and this has caused quite the falling out between him and Miss, or should I say Mrs. Lovegood."

Pomfrey glared at the diminutive head of Ravenclaw, and said, "She's definitely 'Miss'."

"Leaving their love life out of this," Snape drawled, "the boy is quite frankly scared. He would never have made it in your house, Minerva."

"And you know this, how, Severus?" the Gryffindor head of house asked.

"He expressed his belief that he wasn't expecting to survive the tournament in my class. I am, as you are aware, a master Legilimens. He was telling the truth. He's plain terrified."

"Then we must watch him very carefully. A person who feels they have nothing to lose will do anything," Dumbledore warned.

The mediwitch stared at him in disbelief. "Watch him? Watch him! A thirteen year old who thinks he's going to die, and all you can say is watch him?"

"According to the rules of the tournament, we cannot give him any special help. So yes, that's all I can say."

"Oh, Filius," Dumbledore said, as he was leaving the Teachers' Lounge. "Are you still working at the Department of Mysteries?"

"Yes, but I'm almost finished. We figure one or two more sessions should complete the project."

"Maybe someday you can tell me about it?"

"Maybe, Headmaster, but I doubt it."

He had to let it go at that.

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The weekend came again and again Harry hid. He finished packing all of Aunt Sibyll's stuff, shrunk it, and sent it off by owl to Larry. He had also sent a note saying that he was fine and looking forward to the contest. It made no mention of Luna.

Sunday night he returned to the Ravenclaw Tower just before curfew. He found the room empty except for a group of seventh years.

"Lovegood!" Ragingstorm exclaimed. "We want to talk to you."

"That's nice," Harry said, not looking at them, heading for the stairs to the boys' dorms.

"Petrificus Totalus!" she replied, pointing her wand. She missed. Harry had dodged the spell.

"Get him!" she yelled. The group whipped out their wands and started trying to petrify Harry. He pulled his wand out and started casting stunners in return. He had taken four of his attackers out before he was hit. His rigid body hit the floor while the seventh years woke their compatriots. They lifted Harry's stiff body up and leaned him against a chair, but didn't release him from the spell.

"OK, Lovegood," Ragingstorm began, "I'm going to lay this out for you. We don't care how screwed up this is with four students in a three way contest. We don't care if you don't like it, they're going to make you do it anyway. We don't care that you're just a third year.

"What we care about is that you're a Ravenclaw. And we care that you beat that Hufflepuff and those other gits. You're a Ravenclaw, and we're here to help you win as a Ravenclaw. And if you die, you can't win, so we want to help you avoid that little setback, too.

"But you have to work with us. What do you say?"

Harry, of course, still being petrified said nothing.

"Shouldn't you release him if you want an answer?" one of the other students asked.

"I guess. Finite Incantatem."

Harry's body relaxed, and he fell into the chair he was leaned against.

"You really think I can do this?"

"Yes, if you work at it. Your wand work against us gives me more hope. You didn't learn those moves here. But anyway, Bill, give him your briefing."

"Sure, Liz. We analyzed the first task and over eighty percent of them involved a magical creature. Of those, a plurality of them involved dragons. . . ."

"Why did it have to be dragons?" Harry aspirated.

"Uh, right," Bill continued. "We also have a list of thirteen other creatures that have shown up more than once on the first task. We'll be getting you briefings on all of them.

"As for the task itself, there's a pattern there, too. Early contests usually involved slaying the monster. Then it evolved to overcoming or capturing them. Still later having the monster guard something

became very popular. The first time they tried that was a bust, though. The first champion summoned the object, and never got near the manticore. The other champions followed suit. Since then the object has been charmed against the Accio spell. The last two contests involved dragons, so we're guessing that it won't be dragons. So we're going to go over the other possibilities, first. Laura?"

"Right! Listen up, Lovegood! The Cockatrice is nasty. It's got nasty teeth, and nasty claws, and. . . ."

And Harry started getting a crash course in how to overcome some of the most powerful beasts of the magical world. Each night was a different set of animals and spells useful in the situation. After the first night he insisted that they meet somewhere besides the common room. They took control of the "Ravenclaw's unused classroom" one floor down from the tower entrance.

About the same time that Harry was being confronted by the seventh years, in the third year's girls' dorm Luna found herself surrounded by third and fourth year Ravenclaws.

"Luna Lovegood! This has to stop," Liz Ericson, the spokesperson for the group said.

"Leave me alone, please," she answered in a quiet voice.

"No! Just because Harry's being a prat, doesn't mean that you have to do this to yourself. You haven't taken a shower in three days. . . ."

One of the fourth years said, "Ewww!"

". . . and your hair is a mess. If the elves didn't clean your clothes, they would be a mess, too, as you have worn the same thing for several days. This is unacceptable. First, you march right into that bathroom and take a shower!"

"I'd rather not."

"This isn't a request. Some of us have to live here with you. Now move!"

With some helpful hands, Luna found herself in the shower. A new set of her pajamas were laid out for when she was done, and her friends helped untangle her hair, and get it dried and brushed.

"Now, you are going to stop moping around, wear nice clothes, go to the study group, go to Charms Club, and if Harry's too stupid to realize that you're not waiting for him, too bad for him."

"But he hates me!"

"Boys are stupid," Kate Bender, the fifth year prefect who had organized the intervention declared.

"Not Harry," Luna protested.

"All boys are stupid. They can't help it. Either they think that they are the center of the world, strutting about because they play ball or some other sport, or they get good grades, or they can beat someone up, or they come from a family with money, or they're deluded thinking that just because they find themselves interesting, the girl they fixate on should, too. All boys!" Her face booked no arguments.

- - -

On Friday, Harry made his way from the kitchen to his first class (double Charms with the Hufflepuffs) and noticed a number of them had buttons on reading "Support Cedric Diggory, the real Hogwarts Champion." Larry Pohlen and Tom Towey were arguing with Bill Donohue about them when Harry arrived. They stopped when Harry got between them.

He looked at Donohue and asked, "Where did these come from?"

"Some of the seventh years made them."

Harry nodded. "Can I get one?"

"Why?"

"I support Cedric, too. I'm not supposed to be in this thing, and I have almost no chance. But I still support our school and its real champion."

"Oh. Well, I guess you can have this one. I'll get another."

"Thanks." Harry put the button on his robe.

"You really don't want to be in the tournament?" Donohue asked.

"I tried to get out of it, but I can't."

"But what about the fame and glory?"

"Can you tell me one of the previous Triwizard Tournament winners?"

"Uh, no."

"Had you even heard about it before the headmaster announced it?"

"No."

"There's your 'eternal fame and glory.' Sure you can look it up in a book, but that doesn't seem like fame to me."

"What about the Galleons?" Mary Shrake, another Hufflepuff, asked.

"Money can't buy happiness," Harry quoted.

"But it can rent it," Larry Pohlen replied, which caused Harry to laugh. It felt good to laugh. He realized he hadn't had a laugh since his name came out of the goblet. He missed this banter with his friends. He missed

He glanced over at Luna. She looked better than she had recently. Her hair was fixed in a ponytail. She almost never wore it like that. It was clean and brushed. He felt a pang of guilt. He looked away quickly. It was time to go into class anyway.

During class Kate Bender, the fifth year prefect, interrupted Professor Flitwick to take Harry away, per the headmaster's request. He was brought to a classroom with the other three champions. There was also a photographer and a reporter that Harry recognized. She had accosted their family after the incident with the book.

"Ah, Harry! How lovely to see you. I'm Rita Skeeter, and I was wondering if I could have a few words with you. My readers are dying to know how you got into this contest? What sneaky methods got us a fourth and underage contestant?"

She had grabbed his arm, and was trying to get him out of the room. He twisted out of her grasp, and started walking over to the other champions. She grabbed his shoulder and tried to pull him again. He reached up with the hand opposite the shoulder she held, took one finger in a tight hold, and bent it back. Skeeter yelped, and let go.

"I happen to know what a reporter can and cannot do. Touch me again, and I'll call an Auror and have you arrested."

"Well, really! You think I was trying to mug you!"

"I've read your work, and that's exactly what you do in your column."

"You'll be sorry," she said, softly, in a sing song voice.

He ignored her, and joined the other champions.

"Are you sure that was wise, Harry?" Cedric asked.

"Did she interview any of you?"

"No."

"Then she isn't interested in a story about the Tournament. She's looking for gossip. Which is mostly what she is, just a glorified gossip columnist. And I don't need to play her game. I have my own media outlet to get the real story out."

"What do you mean?"

"My uncle is editor of the Quibbler."

At that point they were interrupted by the judges coming in. They brought someone else with them. Harry smiled and received one back from his Uncle Ollie.

It was some sort of ceremony where they checked the wands. Harry found out that Fleur, the Beauxbatons champion, was part Veela. She was also very poised and beautiful. Victor Krum was as quiet and awkward as when Harry had met him right after being chosen. Cedric was his normal self assured self, looking very much like a champion. Harry wondered how he came across.

Ollivander looked over Harry's wand, and frowned at him. He pronounced it in good working order, but said, "You're not using that wand cleaning kit I gave you, are you?"

"Sorry, Uncle Ollie."

"Take care of your wand, and it will take care of you. Good luck with the tournament."

"Yes, Uncle Ollie. Thank you."

While they were getting their picture taken (Harry refused to let them take one of him alone), Cedric asked, "You're related to Ollivander?"

"Yes," he said, rather than try to explain the relationship.

"I remember when I got my wand. He was kind of creepy."

"I think he does that for fun, scaring the children. He was nice to me."

- - -

The next day was almost non-stop tutoring from the seventh years. Not only were they briefing him on various monsters, but they were drilling him on spells that might be useful. He surprised them with the

number of combat spells he knew and the accuracy with which he targeted them.

"Accuracy is very important. A lot of these creatures just aren't affected by most spells for one reason or another. A sphinx' mane is almost impossible to cast through; a manticore's tail is too armored for spells. You have to hit the sphynx right in the face, or the manticore right on the sting. Trolls -- go for the face, but mostly the eyes, ears, mouth, nose -- virtually any opening in it's skull. Nundu -- well, if you face a nundu, just resign. No one will think the worse for you."

By the end of the day, he felt his brain was full. The spells and strengths and weaknesses of the creatures were starting to get confused. They called it a day, and Harry went to bed only to awaken with dreams of the various monsters attacking and him unable to move. He waited until six -- the earliest that breakfast was served, and got up. He took a shower, and headed down towards the Great Hall. He met Mike Daly in the entrance hall.

"Good morning, Harry."

"Morning, Mike."

"You look upset."

"Less than a week until I face whatever it is they're going to have try to kill me for their amusement."

"Harsh. Want a break?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come with me."

"Where?"

"I'm floo-ing to my home. We'll have breakfast, go to church, relax. We'll come back around noon. What do you say?"

Harry, who didn't want to see or talk to anyone at school at the moment agreed. They headed to the headmasters office. Mike had the password ("Cotton candy") to get past the gargoyle and used the same password on the door when no one answered his knock.

"Dumbledore doesn't always get up this early, or want to. So I have permission to use his floo. The paintings will tell him if I touch any of his stuff or do anything I'm not supposed to," Mike explained to his friend.

He showed Harry the pot of floo powder, and ignited a fire, when one of the paintings on the wall interrupted.

"What's he doing here? Only you have permission to go home now."

Mike didn't bat an eye as he answered, "He's coming with me. It's all been arranged."

He threw some floo powder into the fire and said, "Daley House," and spun away in the green flames. Harry quickly followed.

He found himself in a living room. It was comfortable, but a little unusual to Harry's eyes. The electric lamps on the end tables and the telephone looked out of place. The most unusual thing about it was the baby grand piano. Harry found out that Mike played some but his brother, a year younger than him, played well. Mike proudly showed Harry the picture of his brother Mark on the wall, next to a picture of Mike and of a little girl he said was his sister. She was a few years younger than Mark who was a year younger than Mike. Mark was a squib, but there had been a few incidents of accidental magic with Mary, so they expected her to receive a Hogwarts letter in two summers.

Mike took Harry to the kitchen where Mrs. Daley was enjoying a cup of coffee. She remembered Harry from the times they had visited each others houses. Harry's offer to make breakfast was declined and Mrs. Daley did it, although the boys set the table. Soon the rest of the family was up and eating, and Mike picked up all the latest news. Mark had been in a track meet the day before and had placed second and Mary had aced a spelling test. Mike filled them in on what

was happening at Hogwarts. He talked about his classes and the foreign students, but didn't mention Harry's part in what was going on. Harry was grateful, and didn't say anything about that when he was included in the conversation. He kept his answers to "how was your week?" focused on classes.

After breakfast it was time to get ready for church. Mike and Harry got rid of the robes, and Mike lent Harry a "more appropriate" shirt than the Hobgoblins t-shirt he was wearing. Mr. Daley took Harry aside to give him some instructions about behavior in church.

"Basically, stand when we stand, sit or kneel with everyone else. You don't have to say any of the prayers. Sing if you want to. And when we go up for Communion, please wait in the pew with Mike's mother. Other than that, be respectful. Any questions, I'll be glad to answer at the end. Oh, yes, there's a sign of peace, which in your case is a handshake. I think that's it."

"What other signs of peace are there?"

"Kissing. But that's usually just in families," he answered with a smile.

Harry followed Mr. Daley's instructions. The Church, named after St. John Bosco, didn't have a choir loft, but did have an area with a piano, electric organ, and room for the choir towards the front. A group of teenagers with guitars supplied the music. Mr. Daley sang loudly and mostly on key; Mrs. Daley sang enthusiastically, but more off key. Mike had a fairly good signing voice.

There were several spots where the people sat and a man read from the Bible, with singing between the different readings. Then the people stood while the priest, who wore robes, Harry noticed with a smile, read a story that Harry recognized. It was a story he had originally read in Late Latin from the Vulgate. Here, it was read in English. The story told about a woman who was caught committing adultery. Taken to Jesus to see his reaction, he didn't react, and eventually everyone left, while Jesus wrote in the sand. Harry had not understood the story. It was only afterward, as the priest explained the traditional belief that Jesus was writing the sins of the crowd in the sand that Harry finally got it. The priest also said that if you put

yourself into the story, you'll usually be in one of two roles -- either the person caught in sin, or part of the crowd.

That caused him to think. He wasn't perfect, and yet he had, in essence, condemned Luna. Yet he wasn't even innocent of helping get his own name into the goblet. And when he had asked Selene about adultery, she had pointed out that it takes two people, and it looked like only one was being punished. Where was the man?

He knew. He was the man. He was almost as guilty as Luna, but he was part of the crowd. He needed to talk with Luna.

He didn't pay a lot of attention to the rest of the ritual. He shook hands with people around him at the sign of peace (and did notice Mr. and Mrs. Daley exchanged a kiss at that point. He remained in the pew with Mrs. Daley while the others went up to the altar. The final song was sung and they went back to Mike's house. They visited for a while, played a game of cards, and finally it was time to return to Hogwarts. Harry received an open invitation to join them anytime, and they floo-ed back to the headmaster's office.

Unfortunately, the headmaster was there at the time. Despite Mike's insistence that Harry was invited, they still ended up with detention. Harry didn't care, he had to see Luna. Once they were out of Dumbledore's office, Harry thanked Mike, and headed off to find his betrothed.

- - -

Unable to find her, he had asked Liz Ericson to give Luna a note: Please meet me in the room where we found the vase.

He was now nervously pacing while waiting in the Divination Tower. Finally the ladder dropped to the floor below and Luna appeared.

"Yes?" she said, guardedly.

"I'm sorry," Harry started. He hated reading about politicians and other public figures that said "I want to apologize" but never actually did, so he got it out right away.

"I was wrong to be so mad at you, and you didn't deserve that for what would have been a funny joke if everything had worked out as planned. I was scared and mad at having to be in the contest, and I took that out on you, too, even though I helped get myself into this situation. Please forgive me."

She stared at him with her big, silvery eyes for a moment. He got even more nervous. Aunt Selene's words about what might happen if the bond broke were echoing in his brain. Finally she answered.

"Yes. To all of it."

"Huh?" Harry said, confused.

"Yes, you were wrong. Yes, you helped. Yes, you shouldn't have taken it out on me. And yes, I'll forgive you. But you hurt me Harry."

"I know. I'm sorry." He went to Luna and gave her a hug. But when when he tried to kiss her, she turned her head.

"You don't forgive me?" he said, trying to to break the hug, but her arms held him.

"I forgive you, but it's going to take some time to get over the hurt. Give me time, please?"

He actively hugged her again and said, "I will. I hope it doesn't take too long. I have to fight a monster in less than a week."

"Yes, and Ragingstorm is upset that you're not around to hear all about what they learned about basilisks."

"The information is OK, but what's really helping is the spells they've been teaching me."

"My scholar," she sighed, enjoying the hug. "Shall we go and keep Ragingstorm happy?"

"Might as well."

"And Harry? I'm sorry, too. I'm sorry I got you into this contest."

"Thanks, Luna. And I know you didn't mean for it to happen."

"Next time, 'Do not let the sun go down on your anger,'" Luna said.

They headed down the ladder.

"Hey, it was already after sunset!"

"Yes, but there was another sunset the next day."

- - -

Word of their reconciliation spread through the school, proving once again that rumor is the only thing that can go faster than the speed of light. People started talking with them again, as their emotional states hadn't been conducive to conversation for the last few weeks.

Ginny was able to get Luna alone after Double Transfigurations on Tuesday afternoon. She directed the blond to an empty classroom, and confronted her.

"All these years I thought we were friends! But now I find out that your married! And you never told me?"

"We never told anyone, Ginny. Even my Mum didn't know for weeks."

"So this wasn't an arranged marriage?"

"Yes, I arranged it. It was a childish thing to do, but I did it and Harry went along. Although, now that I think about it, we told a number of people when we first got together." She laughed a little. "It wasn't our fault that no one believed us, and Mum kept telling us to cut it out."

"But you never told me."

"I think I did. I remember once you saying you were going to marry Harry Potter, and I said I was going to marry my Harry."

"But that wasn't true. You married him already."

"Technically, we're magically bonded. We intend to have a wedding after Hogwarts."

"So how did it happen?"

"We said the marriage vows to each other, and meant it. You should know how that works."

"Yeah, and how dangerous that is. How did you get Harry to agree? Were you in love?"

"We were seven. . ."

"That long ago?"

Luna nodded and continued, "And I just asked him."

"I wonder what would have happened if I met Harry Potter when he was seven?"

"Oh, Ginny, give it up. I'm sure Harry Potter has his own life now. You have to grow up."

Ginny sighed. "I know, but it's fun dreaming, isn't it? I mean, you're stuck now. If someone nicer, or more handsome, or rich comes along, you can't even think about it, can you?"

"I doubt there's someone nicer. Harry's handsome enough for me. And we've never been rich, but we're not poor, but money can't buy happiness. And I'm happy with Harry."

"But if Harry Potter came along?" Ginny persisted.

"He couldn't make me happier than my Harry. Maybe the same amount. . . ." Luna said with a smile.

"AH HA!"

"Just joking. Let's go get dinner," Luna replied, heading for the door.

"You say you're joking, but I saw that smile, Luna Lovegood!"

"I smiled because it was a joke, Ginevra Weasley."

- - -

Two days before the first task Luna stopped him while they were on their way to dinner. She pulled him into an empty classroom and looked at him intently.

"Getting one last look?" he asked, half joking.

"No, just double checking. You're going to get a letter from Mum tomorrow, by the way."

"About what?"

"They destroyed the ring. The link is gone. All that's left is the line to Voldemort."

"How about after this stupid tournament we start working on getting rid of him, too."

"Sounds good," she said, and gave him a kiss. He hugged her back, and would have given her a deep kiss, except she stopped him.

"I agree it's a special occasion, but I want to wait until after the first task."

"Why?"

"I want you to look forward to something positive."

"As opposed to just being done with it?"

"That's not positive enough. So if you want it, you have to do well Saturday."

"That's blackmail," he said, with a grin.

"Blackmail's such an ugly word," she said, grinning back, and taking his arm as she directed him out of the classroom. "However, it does seem to fit the situation, doesn't it."

They laughed as they went to dinner.

- - -

"Mr. Lovegood, it is time."

Harry got up from the couch in the Ravenclaw common room where he and Luna were waiting. It was the Saturday of the First task, and Harry had been told to hang around the common room after lunch. He had hardly eaten anything and the little he'd had was only because Luna and Hermione insisted. Now Professor Flitwick, his head of house, had come to take him to the first task.

Luna hugged him and said, "Good luck, Harry. And remember, it's not whether you win or lose, it's if you survive!"

Harry snorted. Luna had been using variations on the phrase all week long to lift his spirits. Admittedly, this one wasn't as good as some. It had started out sounding normal:

"It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game."

but had quickly degenerated:

"It's not whether you win or lose, it's if you look good."

"It's not whether you win or lose, unless you lose."

"It's not whether you win or lose, it's the point spread."

"It's not whether you win or lose, as long as you win."

and his favorite:

"It's not whether you win or lose, it's the beer."

So, with a smile, he followed Flitwick out of the castle and to a tent set up at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He was ushered inside and found the other three champions already there. Victor Krum was standing, staring at his shoes. Fleur Delacour was pacing nervously. Cedric Diggory was sitting on a chair, fidgeting.

"Hey, Lovegood," he said.

"Hey, Diggory," Harry replied. He heard the sound of people passing the tent. "Our fans."

Diggory made a sound that could have meant derision, agreement, acknowledgment, or just indifference.

"I hate this waiting. Any idea what the task will be?" the Hufflepuff asked.

Harry shook his head. "Most popular bet in Ravenclaw is something to do a manticore," he answered.

"It eez not a manteecore," Delacour said. Her eyes widened and her mouth closed suddenly.

"What?" Diggory demanded. "What do you know?"

"I know nothing," she said.

"You know it's not a manticore," Harry replied.

"No," said a new voice, "it's not a manticore." The champions turned to see Ludo Bagman enter the tent. "What you are going to face and what order is right here in this little bag. Reach in and take your pick. Ladies with extra knowledge first."

Fleur went a little pale, but Bagman assured her he wouldn't say anything. She reached in the bag and pulled out a small, magically animated, green dragon. She didn't seem surprised.

Harry, however, was.

"Dragons!" he mumbled. "I hate dragons."

"Where were dragons on the betting," Diggory asked, as Krum pulled out a red one with the number two on it.

"Second to least likely. Even 'some unlisted creature' beat dragons." Cedric put his hand in the bag and pulled out a blue gray dragon numbered "one".

"What was less likely than dragons?" He asked, as Harry reached into the bag.

"Something unrelated to creatures," Harry answered as he pulled out the last dragon: a bronze colored one that seemed to have a lot of spikes sticking out of it.

"The Hungarian Horntail. Very dangerous," Bagman commented, unhelpfully. "Right, then. When you're called head down the path and good luck!" Bagman turned and headed towards the back exit from the tent.

"Wait a minute!" Harry said. "We're supposed to slay a dragon?"

"Slay? What ever gave you that idea? You're supposed to get the golden egg away from her. Any more questions?" There weren't any and he left.

Cedric was soon called and they listened to Bagman's commentary. It was full of descriptive statements like, "That's clever." "Look out!" "That was close." Harry wished that Lee Jordan was doing the commentary. At least his bantering with McGonagall was funny. The crowd cheered, and there was silence for about five minutes. Then Krum was called.

Fleur stopped her pacing and looked at Harry.

"That girl, she eez really your wife? I did not know that arranged marriages were still done in England."

"It wasn't arranged. It was us, as children, deciding to get married."

"Did no one tell you how dangerous that eez?"

"No. No one told me. Luna had been warned, but she decided to marry me anyway, because she liked the way her parents were."

"I do not understand."

"She saw how much her parents loved each other, and wanted to be married, just like them. She was seven at the time."

"And you wanted to be married too? Mais oui, of course you would have to want it, because otherwise it would not have been magically binding. Why did you want to be married?"

Later, Harry would think that it was fact that the conversation was keeping his mind from what they were about to do that made him answer so honestly. "I'm an orphan, and the people I was living with didn't want me, and made it perfectly clear. When I went to live with the Lovegoods they wanted me, and I wanted to make sure I was part of the family. It seemed like a good way to become part of it -- at least when I was seven."

"Tell me about your family," Harry said, to change the subject.

Fleur told Harry about her family, her Veela grandmother, her mother and sister who also had the Veela powers.

"Can your Veela powers help you against a dragon?"

"I do not know. I will try to charm him, but we don't know if it will work."

At that point the crowd cheered, and it was quiet.

"They weel call for me soon. Good luck, 'Arry Lovegood."

"Bon chance, Fleur Delacour. The goblet chose you for a reason; you'll do well."

"Merci, 'Arry."

Fleur was called at that point, and walked out with a resolute gait.

Harry paid attention to the commentary this time.

"I don't know what she's doing, but it seems to be working. That sounded like a variation of a snake charm spell; interesting effect. It seems to be working. The big lizard is taking a snooze. Normally a Welsh Green would take at least three dragon handlers stunning it to put it out, but this little lady seems to have done it somehow. Oh, look out! That's got to have hurt. She's got it! She's away! Our third champion has done it!"

Harry hadn't paid much attention to Krum's attempt, but if he had to guess, Bagman was rooting for Fleur. That didn't seem right, considering that he was one of the judges. But some things he said got Harry thinking.

The minutes dragged on. Harry was sure it was taking longer for them to set up his dragon than it took for the others. Finally, his name was called. He left the tent and made his way to an arena. Sitting at one end was a life size version of the Hungarian Horntail that he had in his pocket. Stands surrounded the rocky pit he found himself in. He approached the dragon.

This was his first time seeing it up close. He compared it to what he remembered about dinosaurs. Dinosaurs didn't have wings. Actually, he knew of no mundane creature that had four legs and wings. The tail wasn't stiff, as they thought dinosaur tails were. A kentrosaurus might have a few spikes pointing out of its body, but nothing like this. And those claws -- some dinos might have claws like that. A fifty foot long eagle or owl might, too. Legs were set to the sides, more like a lizard's and unlike a dinosaur's. That might be a good thing.

The head was very triangular; much wider than a meat eating dino, Harry though; more like a viper. He nodded to himself. He had nothing to lose. If it didn't work, he still had "manticore plan A."

He cast the sonorus spell. Then he cast the spell that Willow had taught him.

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Up in the judges box, Dumbledore heard the spell, and realized that he had forgotten the sibilant inflections needed to cast it himself.

"Filius! Quick! Do you remember the Parseltongue spell?"

"Yes, Albus. . . ."

"Quick, cast it and translate for us."

"Zee boy is a Parselmouth?" Madam Maxime asked.

"No, he learned a spell to talk to reptiles from a dryad. What's he saying Filius?"

"He's explaining the contest to the dragon. . . ."

- - -

"Greetings, oh great and beautiful one!" Harry began.

"It's speaks! It speaks to us! How can this be?"

"A dryad taught me, wondrous winged one."

"If you were a snake, I'd say you speak with a forked tongue. Why have I been taken from my nest and brought here, little speaker?"

"These," he indicated the judges, "are using you as a test. You are to guard your eggs, which include a fake egg. I am supposed to get the fake egg away from you."

"So they have brought me here to be a plaything?"

Harry always wondered after this if things would have been easier if he had agreed. But he had decided upon flattery, thinking that "flattery will get you anywhere".

"No, they have you as a challenge; a nearly insurmountable obstacle. I am supposed to defeat you and take the fake egg. But we do not have to play their game. If you just let me take it, neither of us will have to get hurt."

"You fear me." It wasn't a question, but Harry answered it anyway.

"Yes, very much so."

"As it should be."

"Will you let me have the false egg, please?"

"No. If I am to guard it like one of my own, it would hurt my pride if I did not do all that was in my power to protect it. The challenge remains. Face me, or run away. This," she indicated the heavy chain around her back leg, "gives you the chance to run away."

Harry took a deep breath. "Very well then. Avis! Avis! Avis! Avis! Avis!"

Harry kept casting the spell as the air around him filled with birds. He concentrated on them, and they started flying around the dragon. Every now and then some would swoop down and seemingly attack the huge creature. Many would disappear in flame as the dragon breathed on them, trying to get rid of the annoying creatures.

Harry meanwhile was still casting. Every time he couldn't think of something else, he cast more Avis spells, creating another half dozen birds. The ones attacking the dragon would be burned to a crisp if they got too close. Harry's summoning spell didn't gain him the egg. He hoped it wasn't physically held in place, too. He sent several snakes conjured by the Serpensortia spell towards the eggs with the instructions to move the gold one out of the nest. He annoyed the

dragon by hitting her with jets of water -- his range was longer than her flaming breath. He also tried tripping hexes, itching hexes, and other minor annoyances, but they proved ineffective against the dragon. As she stopped trying to incinerate the birds, and tried to get him instead, Harry had the birds land on the back of her head and start pecking. That really annoyed the dragon, as she writhed trying to dislodge the pests.

Harry's snakes, meanwhile, had pushed the wrong egg out of the nest. To be fair to the snakes, it might have been in the way. Harry summoned that egg, and it came to him, and burnt his hands as he tried to catch it. He levitated the egg, and surrounded it with birds. He used the wingardium spell to float it to the other side of the dragon. When it was in place, the birds attacked from that side. The dragon made short work of the flying critters, and saw it's egg sitting away from the others. The dragon went to retrieve it, and Harry made a dash towards the nest. His snake friends succeeded in pushing the gold one out as he got close.

The dragon turned it's head as he was grabbing the egg. He was ready, and hit her in the face with another jet of water. The fact that she closed her eyes at the crucial point was probably the only thing that saved Harry from being impaled as the tail came swinging at him. But he leaped over the spiked appendage and made a dash away from the dragon. The crowd's cheer registered with Harry, and he realized that he had completed the first task. He held the egg aloft, and went toward the people, including Luna, who were waving him over.

He stopped, though, and turned back to the dragon. He bowed, and waved. The dragon bowed it's head, and waved it's tail back. Then Harry left the field.

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Author Note: Yes, I know the first task took place in the book on a Tuesday. I have no idea why. The only people I see who would want it on a weekday would be some Ministry flunkies who might object to working on a weekend. Otherwise, why disrupt classes?

Thanks to my betas Swordchucks , Wombat, and Evan Mayerle.
Take that whack! poor sentence construction!

Chapter 18

Parties

The party in the Ravenclaw tower was loud and long. Harry was one point behind Victor, though that was more to do with Karkaroff's insistence on giving him a low score than on his actual performance. One four among all those nines could have made him angry, but Harry didn't really care. He'd managed to finish without a scratch aside from some mild burns that had been healed before he left the stadium. And he had faced a dragon! Admittedly one that was chained up, but still. . . .

When he opened the golden egg to hear the clue the party came to a sudden halt as the room shook from the sound of an explosion. That was followed by hissing so loud that it drowned out the cries of surprise from the rest rest of the Ravenclaws as they stopped partying to stare warily at the egg. After half a minute of hissing, a second boom rocked the tower. At that point, Harry snapped the lid closed, halting the hiss and any further noises. There was silence in the common room.

"That's the clue?" someone eventually asked.

"They're going to blow you up!" came a helpful suggestion from the crowd.

"There was more cracking than explosion in that noise. I'm not sure what that is. . . ." someone else pointed out.

"Maybe if you listened from far away. . . ."

The brainstorming session continued for a while, but was lost to the rest of the noise as the party broke out again. Harry, along with every one else, went to bed late.

As he lay in bed, he smiled. Right after the task he had been directed to the First Aid tent where he saw Cedric and Fleur with some blue goo on them. They had both been burned (Cedric more than Fleur) while retrieving their eggs. While Madam Pomfrey made sure that he

was uninjured, Luna, Selene, and Larry came into the tent and hugged him. He was happy to have his family around him. That was a magic that he would face a hundred dragons for.

Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were not well represented the next day at breakfast. Harry and Luna, however, were there. Despite partying late, he still woke early. Knowing that he would be tired later, and maybe take an afternoon nap, he went down for breakfast. Luna was waiting for him.

"Good morning," he said. "You're usually not up early."

"I thought I'd join the winning champion for breakfast."

"I'm in second place."

"Which has nothing to do with whether you're a winner or not." Harry laughed. He appreciated Luna's ability to make him laugh.

"Care to join me for breakfast, Mrs. Lovegood?"

"Certainly, Mr. Lovegood."

He held out his elbow, and she hooked her hand around his arm. Together they walked down to breakfast and along the way stopped for one of their special kisses.

That afternoon they were accosted by the upper class Ravenclaws who wanted to try some experiments with the golden egg. Harry refused. He told them that he was taking the day off from the tournament, and for the next few weeks would try to figure the egg out on his own. He thanked them for their assistance so far, even though they hadn't considered how to fight dragons.

There were some protests, but Liz Ragingstorm agreed with Harry's. "He's the champion. He deserves the chance to figure it out." She continued with a smile, "And when he comes crawling to us, we'll make him beg for help. Good luck Harry! You're going to need it."

"Your confidence in me warms my heart," he responded, smiling at Liz' hamming it up.

He worked on homework that afternoon and joined the study group after dinner in the Great Hall. Sunday traditionally had the largest turnout, as those people who put off working on their assignments over the weekend hurried to catch up. Harry deflected some questions about his marriage and he postponed any questions about the next task until after Christmas break.

That evening, as he was brushing Luna's hair, Harry asked her, "So, any ideas on the egg?"

"Yes. But I thought you wanted to solve it by yourself?"

"I thought we could work on it. I didn't want the entire house helping."

"Oh. But I agree with Elizabeth. I don't think I should tell you the answer until you come crawling to me, begging for help."

"You have the answer already?"

"Well, no. But I know what you have to do to find it."

"What?"

"That's the part I don't think I should tell you."

"Can you tell me how you figured it out?"

"There's only about five spells on the egg. And one of them is an anti-Accio spell. But that's all I'm going to tell you."

Harry was stunned. He had envisioned long hours of trial and error, refining theories, and testing again. He never thought to analyze the spells on the egg.

"Luna! You're a genius!"

"I like to think so, but this doesn't prove it. All I did was look at the egg. All this proves is that I'm gifted."

"And I'm gifted by you! Oh, thank you!" Harry was enthusiastic. He figured he'd be able to decipher the spells long before anyone else, even without Luna's help.

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Amidst all the congratulating and disparaging letters he received the week after the tournament, Harry received a unique one.

Dear Mr. Lovegood,

Just a quick note to thank you for the information that we can talk with our charges. Everyone here at the Dragon Reserve is very excited. We've set up a permanent portkey to take us to a nearby Dryad. It seems that no one here can keep that hissing spell in their head for more than a few minutes. But with the Dryad's help we can cast the spell and thus talk to the dragons for up to an hour. We've asked the Dryad if we can plant a seedling on the reserve so that someday we will have a local expert who can cast the spell at any time. She's considering our request.

Being able to talk with our charges has made our job vastly more interesting. You've opened a door to knowledge that we never knew was there. The Dragon Handlers here cannot thank you enough, and I am personally indebted to you.

Your former neighbor,

Charlie Weasley

Dragon Wrangler

Romanian Dragon Ranch

Harry showed the letter to Luna and Mike. "At least I don't have to give another class in hissing."

Mike looked thoughtful. "I've never considered a career as a Dragon Handler."

"You probably should have taken Care of Magical Creatures," Harry countered.

"Yeah, that will probably count against me."

Later, he asked if Mike had been serious about the career choice. "Naw. I don't think I could live in the wilds of places like Romania. I think I like the big city too much. Have you considered a career?"

"I don't know. My uncle makes wands, and that's kind of fun. But I don't know if I want to do that full time."

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Over the next two weeks Harry had a lot of headaches as he worked at analyzing the egg. There was sound magic, and water magic that was some sort of trigger, the anti-summoning charm, some sort of random timing spell that triggered the explosive sounds, and what seemed like some sort of cleaning charm. Harry figured that the last was to keep it shiny.

Meanwhile he had tried several things with water to activate the trigger, but had been unsuccessful.

There were also some unflattering stories in the Daily Prophet about Harry and Luna. They were accused of dabbling in dark magic; their history with the explosive "dark object" the year before, their Parseltongue ability, the fact that they got past the age line by some unknown method, their bonding, and even their discovery of the Greek Temple were presented as proof that they were being taught dark magic and came from a dark household.

The Quibbler fought back. It accused the Prophet of attacking Harry and Luna for personal reasons, namely that they were the children of the editor of the Prophet's rival. They also presented facts about each of the Prophet's points that put Harry and Luna in a good light, except for the children's bond. There was a simple statement that that was a

private matter and until the children themselves wanted to talk about it the Quibbler wouldn't comment. The two students received a lot of mail; about half of it supportive, and half disapproving, with a small amount antagonistic.

After the Prophet's first article on them, they realized that some of the information had come from their school mates. At the study group that night Harry and Luna asked all the students not to talk about them (the Lovegoods) to anyone outside the school. They pointed to some "facts" that the paper had got wrong yet used to castigate them, and hoped that the students would respect their privacy.

There were a number of articles and counter articles in the two papers, and the Quibbler, which was a weekly, put out several Triwizard Tournament special editions to answer the Prophet.

They weren't only about Harry and Luna, however. Larry filled them with background of all the contestants, interviews with their families, and even interviews of some of the other foreign students. He sent a letter telling Harry and Luna that all the issues dedicated to the tournament had sold out, even the later ones when he had increased the print run.

The Attiah twins, two seventh year Hufflepuffs, were hired as stringers, and were trying to get interviews with all the foreign students. They had worked at the paper the previous summer and had expressed interest in becoming journalists. Larry had contacted them with an offer to buy any good information they would send him. Their writing was good enough that he published their whole articles and gave them a byline. After Larry had accepted several of their stories for publication, he offered them jobs for when they were done with their schooling.

Meanwhile, the subjects of the front page stories were inundated with mail every morning. They quickly sorted it into two piles depending on whether they knew the writer or not. The "known" pile was usually very small.

The first time they received a howler Harry was stunned, but only for a moment. After a comment about "dark children corrupting our

school" Harry pointed his wand at the yelling letter and incinerated it. Luna acted like it didn't exist. That became their standard method of dealing with the shouting letters -- as soon as one attempted to activate, Harry would burn it. He soon was doing it soundlessly to the amazement of some of his friends. Luna just gave him a smile and said, "Congratulations." Stories comparing Harry's howler answer to Amelia Bones' method of smashing it with a plate then stabbing it with a fork abounded. Harry's method was considered more efficient, but the way the director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement "killed" one when she was a student was still considered "definitive."

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A few days into December, Professor Flitwick asked Harry to stay after his class. They had been working on sticking charms, and Harry had stuck Tom Lynch's book bag to the ceiling. He hadn't lost any points, but Flitwick had ordered him to get it down. Harry was afraid that he was going to get a detention.

"Mr. Lovegood," he said, after all the other students left and closing the door, "I am informing you that there will be a Yule Ball this year as part of the Triwizard Tournament. Under normal circumstances, you would probably not attend, as it is for fourth years and above, and those third years invited by older students. But it is required that the champions be there, so an exception is being made for you. You will have to invite a date and dance the first dance."

"May I invite Luna?"

"Yes you may. And let me say that I am glad that you and she have made up. And I hope you both have learned a lesson."

Harry nodded as he opened the door. "Yes, sir. Next time we'll put your name in."

"Right. NO! Wait!" But Harry had joined Luna who was waiting across the hall. He gave his head of house a smile and a little wave, and the two walked off as the little professor laughed. On the way to the

Ravenclaw tower Harry asked Luna to accompany him, and she accepted.

The announcement of the Yule Ball was posted in the common room when Harry and Luna arrived. There was a lot of excitement from the fourth years and above and a lot of disappointment for the lower level students. At least that was the case in the girls' dormitories. The boys fell into several groups.

There were those in relationships already; it was a formality to invite their girlfriends. Then there were those who were self confident (or egotistical); they marched off to invite someone they were interested in. The largest group (and it got larger as you went down in years) was the group that lacked the self confidence or experience with girls to make asking one for a date an event less desirable than facing a dragon. They started huddling in fear and embarrassment.

The impending ball had an impact on the study tables. Whereas before the boys and girls mixed fairly freely, from fourth year up they suddenly became segregated. The boys stayed at one end of the table and the girls were at the other. There were even seats left empty in the middle between the two groups.

Harry and Mike, the unofficial (but fairly entrenched) leaders of the third year study group, gave up trying to keep the group on topic after working on a spell for Charms class. The girls kept talking about the ball, how unfair it was that they couldn't go, who they'd like to go with, what they'd wear, and similar topics. The boys for the most part were glad that they weren't allowed (except for a few, like Cranston who had been friends with Margo Lane for years, and would have liked to take her to the ball).

Then word got out that Harry had asked Luna and the topic changed to them. After being asked if his dress robes would match Luna's dress (which he didn't know), it devolved into how insensitive he was being about the whole thing and how ashamed he should be. By that time a number of fourth year girls had joined the conversation, and a group of second years had stopped by to observe, Harry guessed. Deciding he didn't need the grilling he was getting, or the dressing down (for something that was going to happen about a month away?)

he left. A lot of people left at the same time. Seems it wasn't only the third year group that was having trouble concentrating on homework.

Over the next few days the third years' study group calmed down and became the efficient, organized (but still fun) group it had been before. The older students groups still had some problems. Harry noticed that the boys and girls still were separated, but there was a group of couples in between. The couples' group grew day by day. Harry smiled when he saw that Draco and Hermione joined the group a few days after the announcement of the ball. As the study group was breaking up, he and Luna walked over to the fourth year table.

"So I take it you two are going to the ball together," Harry half asked.

"Yes. I wonder what it will be like?" Hermione gushed.

Draco kept his normal reserve, and said, "It's the social event of the school year. It's to be expected that I bring the prettiest girl." Hermione blushed.

"We'll look forward to seeing you," Luna said. "Mum will be taking me to get a new dress after the term ends."

"You're going too? Who asked you?" Hermione asked.

"Harry, of course."

"But third years. . . ." she began.

"Champions are required to go. Even underage champions," Harry told them.

Mike came over at that point, semi-followed by a group of third years.

"Hey, guys. I was going to try a new game. You can join if you want."

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Ever play dodge ball?" The group Harry was with shook their heads except for Hermione.

She answered, "No thanks."

"It's not quite dodge ball; I figured if the wizarding world has spell tag, why not dodge spell?"

Harry asked, "How do you play?"

"Come on, I'll show you."

He collected a few more fourth years and led them to the dungeon. There was an empty, unused room that was large enough to attempt Mike's game. In Muggle dodge ball, the players threw balls at each other. In dodge spell, they were to throw minor hexes at each other. For the first game, Mike limited it to just jelly-legged curses. He ruled shield spells were illegal, the name of the game was "dodge spell" after all. Besides, only a few of the children knew how to cast a shield. Harry promised to teach the group after the game.

A limiting factor in the Muggle version of the game was the number of balls. There was no such limit in dodge spell. Players like Harry and Neville could cast a half dozen in the same time that some people could only cast one. Harry and Neville's (and Nott's) proficiency in speed casting caused them to become the primary targets of the opposing side. They found that if a half dozen people were casting spells at you as quick as they could, when the casters aim was off it often didn't matter, as the target might dodge into the mis-cast spell. The consensus of the players was that it was interesting, but not worth playing again. A group of boys did decide to learn how to conjure rubber balls, and made arrangements to try a game of dodge ball.

Harry, Draco, Nott, and Neville taught the rest of the group the Protego shield spell. They considered allowing it in the game, but most people didn't think it would save the game and rejected it.

As they were leaving the dungeon room, Mike said, "Come spring, I wonder if we can come up with a magical version of football [soccer?]" which started a discussion that wasn't finished by the time the group

broke up to go their separate ways. As they headed up the stairs from the dungeons, Harry found himself walking with Neville and Ron.

"You had it easy," said Ron.

"What do you mean?"

"You had a ready-made date for the ball. I can't even get close to a girl. They're flocking! They're always in groups!"

"It is intimidating," Neville added.

"Now that you mention it, they do seem to move in groups more than they used to," Harry admitted.

"And they're always whispering and giggling. What's up with that?" Ron complained.

"Don't know mate. So you haven't asked anyone yet?"

"No, and if they don't stop flocking, I don't know if I will. Girls have it easy: all they have to do is wait around for someone to ask them out."

Harry wasn't sure that was right, but kept his mouth closed. They went their separate ways, and Harry found Luna waiting for him in the common room.

"Hello Harry. How was the game?"

"Didn't work out as well as Mike hoped. How was your evening?"

"Fine. Finished the Aeneid. Do you think Uncle Remus' mother was a seer when she named him that?"

"Don't know," Harry answered, as he took the brush, and began to work on her hair.

"Ron was just saying that girls have it easy, they just have to wait around for someone to invite them to the dance."

"Oh really, Mr. Lovegood?" Uh, Oh. Harry knew that tone. This was going to be bad.

It wasn't so bad. Luna just explained how things really are, and Harry agreed at the proper places. She kept her tone low and conversational. They even kissed and said good night once she was done; then headed off to their respective bedrooms.

The next evening after the study groups, Harry led Ron and Neville down a corridor away from the other students.

"You had it completely wrong, Ron. Guys have it easy. All they have to do is ask a girl. A girl has to wait and wonder is she's pretty enough? Is her hair the right way? Is her laugh wrong? Are her gazelles developed enough? Are they too big? Is her personality a turn off? Did she accidentally put down a boy and get a reputation?

"What if the wrong boy asks her? Someone she likes, but was hoping to go to the ball with someone else? Does she agree to go with him? Or hope that the one she wants will ask her? What if someone she doesn't like asks her? Will he pressure her? Insult her? Start rumors about her? Get revenge?

"That's why they go in groups, for protection and moral support. And if a boy can't get enough courage up to ask despite the group, they probably don't want to go with him."

"Oh, sure, Harry. That might be the way they see it. But what about us? What if they turn us down? What if they make fun of us for asking?"

"If a girl politely turns you down, be polite back and just ask someone else. If they aren't polite when they turn you down, then that's not someone you want to go with anyway, right? Just suck it up and ask!"

Neville took a breath, and nodded. "You're right, Harry. In the end, we just have to ask. Do you have your eye on anyone, Ron?"

"There are a few girls. . . ."

"Let's go ask."

"They're up in the Gryffindor tower, mate. You can't come."

"That's alright. The one I'm thinking of is in the basement. Thanks Harry! I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good luck, Neville. 'Luck, Ron."

The next evening, Harry noticed that Neville and Susan Bones had joined the couples section of the 4th year table. Ron and Parvati Patil also joined. Harry found out later that Ron asked Lavender Brown first, but she was going with Seamus Finnigan, another fourth year Gryffindor. Ron and Parvati seemed to get along pretty well, and Harry was happy for his friends.

The last day of the term the study group was more a social gathering. They spent fifteen minutes on Arithmancy (at the insistence of some Ravenclaws) but actual work fell by the wayside as people started singing Christmas carols at the fourth year table. More and more students joined in. Somebody had the elves provide marshmallows and long forks, and soon, with the help of Professor Flitwick who was monitoring the Great Hall that evening, the tables were pushed back, cushions were spread over the floor around the huge fireplace, and the lights had dimmed. It was about that time that Fred and George Weasley showed up. They each had a box of chocolates that they handed out. Mike Daley took one, and handed the box to Harry. Harry popped one into his mouth, passed the box to Luna, and gasped as Mike's tongue started growing. It was over a foot long when something happened to Harry.

He wasn't sure what was going on at first, but suddenly he didn't fit on the cushions like he had been. He sort of rolled off. He looked down at his body and saw he was covered with yellow feathers and his body had taken a bird shape. He looked at Mike, whose tongue was several feet long and who looked panicked, and tried to say something, but all that came out was a chirp. Harry was also considering panicking, but with a shudder and an explosion of yellow feather, he molted and became himself once more. He looked around

and saw that "Bookie" Bolen had sprouted an elephant's trunk, Terry Oberuk had bunny ears, and Margo Lane's skin was bright blue.

"Oy! Fred! We never had that side effect before," one of the twins (obviously George) said.

"Nope. Hang on Harry, we'll fix you right up."

Harry glanced down at himself, and didn't see anything wrong. But then Luna, who was now standing over him, grabbed his hand and started pulling him up.

"I think you've done quite enough. I'll get this fixed," she said in a no nonsense voice that Harry had almost never heard her use. He got up and started to ask what the problem was, but she shook her head a little, and said, "Come on Harry. We'll come back for your stuff," and almost dragged him out of the hall.

Once out, he asked, "What's the matter?"

"Your hair. The transformation spell in that candy reverted it and your eyes back to their real color. We have to get you fixed up right away, and no more eating magical candy from the twins."

"How was I supposed to know it was enchanted?"

"Sorry. But from now on, just assume anything they give you is. I bet you'll be right more often than wrong."

"Yeah, and I'll end up like Mad Eye -- carrying my own drink around because I'm paranoid."

"But in the case of the twins -- they are trying to get you with a prank."

Harry washed his hair with the special bottle of shampoo that had the hair color in it. He had to do that every couple of weeks anyway. He also put in the Eye-Dye and went to bed. He hated the stuff, and it made his eyes hurt for a few hours, but he understood the necessity.

When Luna returned to the Great Hall the party was still going on. The twins had run out of joke candy, and word of the party had reached the upper levels, who had joined in. The large fireplace on the Gryffindor side of the Great Hall was now surrounded by lounging teenagers, many of whom were sitting as couples. Professor Flitwick had again provided more cushions for just arrived students. He hurried over to Luna when she reappeared, as did the twins.

Luna told them that Harry's hair had reverted by itself, but he wasn't feeling well and had gone to bed. Fred and George were still interested in the magical side effect, but Luna acted mad at them again, so they left off. She explained it to Flitwick by saying that Harry had been bullied and teased a lot when he was young, and she was probably over concerned about his reaction to being pranked. Flitwick seemed to accept the explanation and let it go.

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Harry and Luna got off the Hogwarts Express and found Larry waiting. The train had been less crowded than it usually was for the Christmas break. There had been plenty of third years, though, and Harry and Luna had visited with many of their classmates. Harry enjoyed that, but wondered why they had to take the train. Theoretically, they could have floo-ed straight home from the school. But the only (known) fireplace there that allowed travel was the one in the headmaster's office. As it was, after getting off the train, they queued up to use the public access fireplaces and went straight home.

The Lovegoods were going to spend as much of the holidays together as they could; they would only be back at school for the Yule ball. They had an invitation to Sirius' Boxing Day Party and they were going to celebrate Christmas and Christmas Eve as a family.

The six days remaining before Christmas day sped by as Harry and Luna decorated the house, bought and wrapped presents, visited their extended family, and even did some homework. Selene and Larry also spent time teaching the two students to dance. Larry was rather bad at it, but seemed better when he danced with Selene. To say that Harry or Luna were good would be stretching the truth a bit,

but they weren't bad, and they became comfortable dancing with each other.

Harry took some time to work on the egg. He discovered another spell on it -- an anti-silencing charm. The first time he opened it in the house, he brought Selene and Larry running to find out who blew up the bathroom. Harry explained it to them, and they left him to his experiments. Harry had the egg in the tub and had filled the hollow top with water. Didn't help. He then filled the tub and tried opening it underwater. The sound of the explosion caused the water to splash. Harry even stuck his head under the water right after an explosion, under the fairly well established theory that another explosion wouldn't sound right away, and afraid of what the pressure wave would do to his eardrums. All he heard was the static sound.

He closed the egg and drained the tub.

Christmas Eve arrived and Uncle Ollie came for dinner. Harry, Luna, and the wand maker talked about runes throughout dinner. While Luna enjoyed them for themselves (perhaps a legacy of her experience with the Quibbler's puzzle) Harry seemed obsessed with what he could do with them. Ollivander discussed ward making and breaking, and the various professions that being a master of runes would open up, including wand making. Ollie's enthusiasm for his job was evident as he became more animated and gesturing wildly as he talked about it. Harry had done very little wand making since the summer except to collect some more sticks (with the help of Hagrid) from the forbidden forest and work on their shaping with the little lathe that Ollie had given him. But over the last month and a half he'd been a little preoccupied.

"One problem I had with the softer wood is cutting too deeply. I ruined a number of promising branches when I forgot how easy some of them carve."

"Yes, attention to your material is vitally important, but even then you can end up ruining a promising branch. One of the hardest to work with is Whomping Willow. Besides its tendency to try to get away from the knife, it's one of the most challenging woods I've ever encountered. That's why you use a strengthening charm to stiffen it

up and make it workable." He spent a few minutes teaching Harry the spell.

"Are you still interested in working at the shop this summer?"

"Yes, very much," Harry answered. "But I'm not saying I want to do that for the rest of my life."

The old wand maker smiled and nodded. Ollivander left soon after that.

One other thing occurred that Christmas Eve. Larry read a letter from Aunt Sibyll. She was doing well and had taken a job as a secretary at the Aurors' headquarters in New Goetry. She was also seeing an Auror, Inspector Henderson. She hoped to bring him for a visit some time this upcoming year. She sent her love and good wishes.

They went to bed early, as the next day would be a late night for Harry and Luna.

Christmas morning came, and Harry and Selene made breakfast and brought it up on trays to their spouses. After eating, they opened presents, and Harry and Luna packed their things for the overnight stay at Hogwarts. Around noon the fireplace flared and Mrs. Malfoy came through. Larry greeted her, and directed her towards the kitchen, where Selene was. A moment later it flared again and Harry was shocked to see Hermione Granger appear.

"Hermione! What are you doing here? Er...I mean, happy Christmas! Can I get you anything?"

"Happy Christmas, Harry. And no, I'm just stopping by with Mrs. Malfoy to pick up Luna and her mother."

"What's going on?"

At that point, Selene, Luna, and Mrs. Malfoy came in.

Luna answered with a mysterious smile, "Nothing that concerns you, Harry, at least not yet. I'll see you tonight at Hogwarts. Be ready, and don't be late!"

"I won't be late," Harry retorted.

"Let's get some lunch, and get you back to Hogwarts, Harry," Larry said, clapping him on the shoulder. As Harry left the parlor, he heard the floo being used.

"So, what is all that about?" he asked.

"Secret. Sorry, can't tell you."

After lunch, Larry side-along Apparated Harry to the gates of Hogwarts, and walked in with him. The entrance hall was more decorated than Harry had ever seen it. There was a barrier at the hallway leading to the Great Hall with Hagrid standing before it.

"Hey, Hagrid!"

"'Ello, Harry! Glad to see you back. You don' wanna miss tonight, I'm guessin'."

"No, since I'm supposed to help open the ball. Hagrid, would it be alright for my Uncle Larry to come to the Ravenclaw common room while I'm waiting?"

"Actually, we're opening up the teacher's lounge to allow those parents who want to see their children before the ball someplace to wait. But we weren' expectin' any parents six hours before the ball, so I guess it'll be fine for a little while."

"Thanks, Hagrid. Will you be at the ball?"

"I'm thinkin' I might show up for a bit."

"I'll see you then."

"Right you are, Harry!"

Harry led his guardian to the Ravenclaw common room where they visited for a while. Around five a buffet table appeared so people could have a snack before the dance, as dinner wasn't being served until eight. Larry glanced at his watch, and shooed Harry out of the common room around five thirty. His timing was perfect and Luna came into the common room moments later.

"You look wonderful, er. . . ." Larry stopped. The game he had been playing with Luna for, well, her entire life, where he called her a plant, but never used the same one twice, came to a halt then. His little girl was still little, but she wasn't a girl any more.

"You really do look gorgeous, Luna. Harry's gone up to get ready. You should probably get a quick bite to eat and do the same."

"Thank you, Daddy. I love you!"

"And I love you." They hugged, and Larry went down to find his wife in the teacher's lounge.

Harry showered, shaved (which he didn't have to do too often, but did it just to make sure), and dressed in his formal robes. Selene had taken him shopping for them when the Hogwarts letter had included them on the list of requirements last year. He put them on, and checked the time. Not even six thirty! He lay on his bed and waited.

An hour later found him down in the common room with numerous other boys waiting for their dates. The tall, arched windows were dark, and all he saw was his own reflection. Then she appeared.

He had never seen her look so lovely before. Her hair was . . . different. Part of it was up, and part of it was down. All of it was shiny and beautiful. She wore a silvery dress that sparkled, and when she saw him looking at her, her face lit up in a big smile.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, as he took her hand as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Thank you. You clean up well, too," she said with a smile.

"You're hair is" Harry sputtered for words.

"That's where we went this afternoon. Mrs. Malfoy made special arrangements with Madam Lorie to do our hair. Have you seen Hermione yet?"

"No. I've only been down here for about fifteen minutes."

"I doubt she was down before then. Shall we wait for her?"

"Sure. But we can't wait too long. We lead the procession in, you know."

"Never mind, then. We'll just escort this lady down."

The lady in question was Hermione. Her hair, too, was completely different. No longer bushy, it was tied up in a beautiful knot and had a shimmering sheen to it. Her dress was periwinkle blue, and looked wonderful on her. Harry and Luna complimented her, and they all headed to the entrance hall to find Draco and enter the ball. They met Luna's parents, who took pictures of the couple before they headed for home. Mrs. Malfoy also took pictures of Draco and Hermione.

Harry had a wonderful time. He had to admit that he liked the slow dances better than the wild, fast ones. Luna did, too, and they often sat the fast ones out. They visited with Fleur and Roger Davies, Cedric and Cho, and Victor and Daphne Greengrass at the Champions table during dinner. They saw Neville and Susan, Parvati and Ron, and Draco and Hermione dancing. At one point they saw Ron and Lavender Brown enjoy a dance, and Harry and Draco changed partners for a dance, too.

The only strange occurrence during the evening was when Luna and he took a break, and they wandered outside where a rose garden had been set up, with weather charms set to keep it warm for the dancers, some of whom were in very light dresses. While they were passing Snape, who was snarkily taking points from couples who were getting too familiar, Luna took her wand and conjured a jar. She captured a large black beetle, and interrupted Hagrid and Madam Maxime to ask

Hagrid to take care of the beetle until she could pick it up from him at the end of the evening. Harry, Hagrid, and Madam Maxime all looked at her like she was crazy, but she reiterated how important the bug was. Hagrid took the jar and it disappeared into one of his large pockets.

"What was that all about?" Harry asked her a short time later.

"I'll tell you later. Now, you have to dance with me some more, Mr. Lovegood."

"My pleasure, Mrs. Lovegood."

Luna did retrieve the jar, and much sooner than the end of the dance. She took it Percy Weasley, and handed it to him.

"What is this?" he asked, looking at the bug like, well, he was looking at a bug.

"That's an animagus. I'm not sure who it is, but I very much doubt they should be crawling around the party without an invitation."

"How do you know it's an animagus?" he asked, suspiciously.

"The same way I knew a certain rat was one. If you don't want to handle it, I'll call the Aurors."

"No, we don't want an international incident. I'll have them check it out after the ball."

"Thanks, Percy," Harry said.

As they were dancing, Harry asked, "Any idea who it is?"

"Not a clue. But I'll bet whoever it is was up to no good."

Harry couldn't argue the point, so they went back to dancing.

The party ended at midnight, and Harry and Luna and Hermione headed up to the Ravenclaw tower. As they reached the stairs on the

fourth level, Harry and Luna told Hermione not to wait, and disappeared around a corner, out of the main thoroughfare to the tower. Harry wrapped his arms around Luna and they shared a very special kiss that seemed to go on and on. Eventually they broke apart, and Harry looked at Luna like he had never seen her before. She was flushed, and he was panting.

"You know, when we agreed to not do certain things before we have our marriage ceremony. . . ." he began.

"But we did agree," she answered, taking his arm, and steering him back towards the tower.

"Yes we did, but until tonight, I never felt it would be hard to wait."

"We're growing up, Harry. Our bodies are too. But I trust Mum. She's probably right that we don't need the complication in our lives right now. And we need our sleep. Uncle Sirius' party is tomorrow, and we don't want to be more tired for that than we are going to be if we go to bed right now."

"You're right," he said, and they made their way to the Ravenclaw tower. "I had a really good time," he added.

"Thank you for inviting me."

"Thank you for accompanying me."

They shared one more, public kiss in the common room, and went to bed.

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The next morning Harry woke up late. He thought back over the evening and smiled. He got dressed, and went down to the common room. A few upper years were there, but none said that they had seen Luna. Deciding to let her sleep in, he made his way to the Great Hall for some breakfast.

It was scandal city. Ron and Parvati had broken up, as had Seamus and Lavender, and now Ron and Lavender were dating. About a dozen boys (Draco was the only one he knew well) had been slapped for trying to go "too far" with their dates. At least one unnamed girl in each of Slytherin, Gryffindor, and Hufflepuff was pregnant. (Harry wondered if Ravenclaws were too smart, or too moral to get into that situation.) Rita Skeeter had been arrested for being at Hogwarts illegally. Hagrid and Madam Maxime eloped after the ball. Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick were seen leaving the party together. He and Luna had had a terrible fight and were going to do an unbinding ritual.

With that last one he knew that most of the rest were rubbish. He sighed. He wondered if he would be seeing any of these rumors in the Prophet. He knew for a fact that Draco and Hermione had parted in the Entrance Hall with a friendly kiss. He was also sure that Ron and Parvati did not break up, but to be honest, he didn't see them at the end of the ball. Hagrid had danced with Madam Maxime. If anyone had gotten pregnant the night before, he was pretty sure they wouldn't know it yet. If Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick decided to ignore their differences in age and height, whose business was it but theirs?

Somewhere he had heard that living in a small town meant that there were no secrets. Did living in a very small town, like Hogwarts, mean there was no truth? As it turned out there was some, Rita was really arrested, and was going to spend a few months in Azkaban for being an illegal animagus. Harry shuddered, and resolved to register as soon as he succeeded in his transformation.

He made his way back to tower (telling at least three people that he and Luna had not had a fight) and asked one of the female students to get Luna up for him. She eventually appeared. Since it was so close to lunch, they decided to just go home and eat lunch there. They made their way to the Headmaster's office, where Professor Ransom of Ancient Runes was monitoring the Floo. They presented their written permission forms, and floo-ed home.

After lunch, the family went to Sirius' for the annual Boxing Day party. It seemed to have the usual crowd. Frank and Alice Longbottom were

the new additions this year, they came with Neville and his grandmother. Draco was living there with his mother, now. Bill, the oldest Weasley boy, was also there; he was working at Gringotts main branch in London. Sirius and Hestia announced their engagement during dinner. Harry was called away at one point by Sirius, and found himself alone in a room with him and Remus. He performed his animagus meditation and transformed his whole body except his head. They tried a few more times, then let Harry get back to the party. They promised to try again over Easter break.

Sirius turned to Remus. "Maybe we should use the method that worked for James, the rat and I."

"What's that?"

"You don't remember?"

"I wasn't there, remember? You surprised me during fifth year with a fait accompli. So no, I don't know the method the rest of you used."

"Oh. I'm surprised no one mentioned it to you."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"What was the method you used to complete the transformation?"

"Oh, that. We finished off a fifth of Ogden's Firewhiskey then did it. We felt we could do anything after that."

"You realize you're lucky you survived your teen years?"

"Yeah, well"

"Let's get back to the party. If he's still having problems with the full animagus transformation when he's 17 we'll give him the opportunity to try your method."

"We weren't 17," Sirius pointed out.

"And you're lucky to not have made a fatal mistake when you were three sheets to the wind."

The party finished with the traditional exploding Snap game. Sirius had had to expand the dining room to fit the whole party. Luna sat out the game, despite calls for her to join in. She just politely declined and sat and watched the twins cheat, Draco pass hot cards to Ron, Harry play aggressively until his cards started to explode, then play conservatively until he noticed he was losing, Sirius, Remus, and Mr. Weasley avoid giving hot cards to Hestia, Tonks, and Mrs. Weasley respectively, Hermione try to figure what runs each of the other players were collecting, and Bill Weasley scowl but not say anything when he caught the twins cheating. In other words, she enjoyed herself watching everyone have a good time.

The party broke up, and some very tired Lovegoods collapsed into bed that night.

The rest of the week was fairly quiet. Harry had a chance to play with snow and the golden egg when Dover was covered with the white stuff. It didn't help. He tried frozen water. Still nothing worked. He would take to staring at the egg, as if he could scowl the answer out of it.

New Years Day came, and Harry and Luna were sent to the Weasleys for the day. Selene was having some co-workers over for a lunch meeting, and needed the children out of earshot. Harry and Luna had a relaxing day at the Burrow.

Meanwhile, back at the Meadow, things weren't exactly as described. Selene's boss, Algie Croaker, did floo over. But so did Remus, Sirius, Frank and Alice Longbottom, and Mr. Ollivander. And Larry didn't leave, either. Selene served lunch, and everyone moved to the living room.

"Thank you all for coming," she began.

"I take it that this isn't just a social gathering," Sirius commented.

"No," she answered. "This group, plus a few goblins, are the only people who know where Harry Potter is now."

Sirius and Remus smiled. Frank and Alice looked at the others. Ollivander sat calmly, his large, silvery eyes drifting over the others in the room.

"Now, what some of you don't know is that there was a prophecy made about Harry before he was born. It says he has a power to vanquish the Dark Lord. This could, of course, refer to his destruction of Voldemort's body when he was one. He could also refer to another dark lord altogether. The child of the prophecy could also be Frank and Alice's son, Neville. There's been some hints that the Headmaster might have been trying to get Neville to be more" she searched for a word.

"Adventurous?" suggested Alice.

"Exactly. There were some hints, but Dumbledore hasn't said anything to either Neville or Frank and Alice about this, which we think is poor judgment on his part. That, coupled with Harry's original placement with his mother's relatives without any sort of supervision, tells me that Dumbledore's wisdom is lacking in this matter, and I want him as far away from Harry as possible."

"As do I," growled Remus, who had been kept from seeing Harry for years by Dumbledore.

"This is all well and good, but what does this matter? Voldemort's gone, right?" Sirius asked.

Algie answered, "He's trying to come back. We know that his spirit possessed a Hogwarts teacher several years ago and tried to steal the Philosopher's stone to use the Elixir of Life to get his body back. Dumbledore reported this to Fudge, who didn't do anything about it.

"This year, Barty Crouch, Jr. used a Confundus to try to get Neville into the Triwizard. It seems that the Dark Lord knows about the prophecy and was trying to eliminate one of the potential children who could vanquish him."

"Why didn't the Prophet report this?" Sirius wanted to know.

"If you check the owners of the paper, Fudge is one of the largest shareholders. They do what he says," Larry informed him.

Algie nodded, "Something else that wasn't reported: Voldemort has a body back. It's a homunculus, but it's still a body. We think he wanted Neville for a ritual to get a real body. And if that failed, then he was going to use one of the other champions of the tournament.

"So, what all this means is that he's out there right now, trying to get a new body and start the war again."

"And we are going to do what?" Sirius asked.

"Going to do what we can to help Harry or Neville vanquish him."

- - -

The new term started and Harry became busy with schoolwork again. But after two weeks he found the sixth and seventh years waiting for him in the common room.

Ragingstorm was once again spokesman for the group. "Okay, Lovegood. Times up. Present the egg."

"But. . . ."

"It's six weeks until the second event. Have you solved the egg yet?"

"No, but. . . ."

"Face it, these problems weren't designed for you. We're not trying to ruin your fun, but time is running out. Even after we solve the egg there's still research and training to take care of."

"Harry, shall I go get the egg?" Luna asked.

He nodded, "Yes, please."

She disappeared up the stairs.

"Let's hope we're not too late," one of the older boys said.

Harry was a bit annoyed. "It's not like I haven't been solving it."

"Sure you were. Now, we'll help you," the same boy said.

Harry sat away from the group and erected a sound barrier between him and the group. Luna handed the egg over to them, and joined Harry.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"They weren't interested in what I had discovered, so I thought I'd let them have a little time."

Luna sat beside him, and asked an elf to get them some popcorn.

"So what have you discovered?"

They talked while they watched the NEWT level students play with the egg. Behind their sound barrier they laughed when one of the researchers would jump at the explosive sound the egg made. Harry brushed Luna's hair, and then they cuddled and had a few deep kisses.

"Cut it out, you two," Ragingstorm said, having walked through the silencing spell. Harry and Luna broke apart, and looked at her with big grins on their faces.

"Something I can do for you?" Harry asked.

"Aren't you going to work on this too?"

"I've done a lot of work already. Would you like me to tell you what I've already discovered?"

Her demeanor changed from annoyed to contrite. "Sorry. Yes, why don't you tell us what you've already done."

Harry removed the sound barrier and rejoined the rest of his house mates. He explained the spells he had detected on the egg and how the sound was linked to the water magic. He described all the ways he had tried to activate whatever the trigger was -- wetting, immersion, snow, ice, filling the top with water, and the rest of his attempts. The group brainstormed for a little while before Harry heard a useful suggestion.

"You've tried solid and liquid. What about the gas form of water? Steam?"

Harry cocked his head and thought. "That's not bad. I'll try it when I take a shower in the morning. Meanwhile, we're going to bed. Good night." He collected the egg and went up the stairs to the third year's dorm.

The next morning a very tired Harry dragged himself out of bed, collected his clothes for the day, and made his way to the bathroom he shared with the other boys in his year. He went into a shower, turned on the hot water, and waited for it to steam up as he got undressed. He cast the sound barrier around the shower so as to not wake the rest of the tower, stepped under the water, and realized something. He stood under the water, trying to make heads or tails out of his discovery. He shrugged, and opened the egg. There was the cracking explosion again. It wasn't steam. He closed the egg and finished washing himself up. He dressed, put the egg away in his trunk, and went down to the common room. None of the upper class Ravenclaws were there, so he left the tower. A quick breakfast later, and he was in the library. He searched for information on his new interest. He found something in a book of household charms, and he silently cursed himself. It was a spell he had used that very morning. But he didn't think it would be enough. He continued searching.

He found a reference to a more powerful spell, but when he checked the catalog for the book it was in, he found it in the restricted section. Eventually the bell rang and he had to go to Arithmancy. Luna didn't

have a chance to ask him what was going on until after the class was over.

"I have an idea for the egg. If I'm right, we'll have the clue by the end of the day."

"That's wonderful, Harry. What's your idea?"

"It's a secret."

"No it's not. Even if it works, at least four people already know it, and as many as seven."

"Huh?"

"The Judges already know how to decipher the egg, and maybe the other three champions do, too. So even if you're right, it's not much of a secret. 'Two people can keep a secret as well as one can, if one of them is dead.'"

"You seem a nice person. I'd hate to kill you."

"You seem a nice person. I'd hate to die.' But really, Harry, please tell me. Please, please, please, please?"

"Later. I'd really like to work this one out all by myself."

"Oh, all right." They reached their transfiguration class and said no more about it. After class, Harry went up to Professor McGonagall.

"Professor, can I get permission to get a book from the restricted section?"

"What book is it, and why do you need it, Mr. Lovegood?"

"Curses They Will Not Recover From, and I need it for a spell for the Triwizard Tournament."

Unfortunately, he couldn't get around telling McGonagall what he was doing. She eventually allowed him access to the book, but not before

referring him to several other books that had spells that weren't so lethal. He thanked her and went straight to the library. As he promised he looked at the other books the Transfiguration professor suggested. They might have worked, but they were long and complicated rituals, so he eventually gave Madam Pince the permission slip, and he made his way into the Restricted section. Madam Pince was very skeptical about allowing him access to the book he requested, but in the end she couldn't argue with the permission form signed by McGonagall. Finding the book, Harry took it to a table and made notes on the spell that had captured his interest. He glanced at some of the other spells. The one to turn someone inside out was particularly gruesome. He turned the book in to the librarian when he was done.

He missed lunch, spending it in the library. But as he had the next two class periods free, he slipped into the kitchen to get a sandwich, and then found an empty classroom to do some practicing. It took him a while, but eventually he got the spell working. He headed up to the Ravenclaw common room.

Luna was reading there and looked up when he came in.

"I'm going to try it, want to join me?"

"Sure."

He got the egg, and led Luna to an empty classroom. It was the third room they tried; Ravenclaws had a tendency to congregate in the empty classrooms around the tower for quiet study.

Harry warded the room against sound, and then cast some other spells around the room.

Luna looked around. "You're warding the room for water?"

"From water. What does the egg sound like?"

"Static and something big breaking."

"Could it be heavy rain and very close thunder?"

"Yes, it could."

"Since I want to try to get rid of those sounds, I'm going to try to dry out the egg."

"That might work."

"Watch your ears," Harry said, as he opened the egg. They were hit by the very familiar sounds. Harry tried the drying spell that he had used to dry up after the shower that morning. The static sound may have dropped a little in volume. He cast some more, and there was a definite reduction in the sound of pouring rain. The thunder didn't sound as near, either. They heard another voice from the egg but the other sounds still overpowered it. Further drying charms didn't have any effect.

"Now what?" Luna asked.

"We could use weather magic on it, but that could take hours or days to work. I have this spell that will mummify someone by drying up all the liquid in their body. I thought I could try that. I used it earlier causing glasses of water to dry up. Ready?"

"Whenever you are," Luna sounded excited.

Harry cast the spell, and the sound of rain and thunder evaporated. Another voice that may have always been there was now heard. They listened to it say the same thing several times before they closed the egg.

"Seek your treasure way up high,

where the peak meets the sky.

Come prepared, the guardians be

on ground, in air, and hard to see.

But found, the task is not complete

To get it safe is the rest of the feat.

But search up high among the clouds,

You'll find it waiting on Mt. Dowdes."

Harry and Luna went to their last class of the day, but Harry later confessed that he didn't learn much from Sir Giles that day. They ate dinner, and collected their books for homework. After the study group, they went back to the Common Room. They had briefly discussed not going back to the tower until curfew, but Luna convinced Harry that the yelling wouldn't be worth it.

They were still accosted by the upperclassmen when they arrived.

"Lovegood! We've been waiting," Ragingstorm said.

"Sorry, should have sent you word -- I solved it. The trigger wasn't water. It was an absence of water. The sound is the sound of a thunderstorm. Dry up the water, the storm ends and you can hear the clue.

They forced Harry to let them hear it. Then the brainstorming began.

"A treasure, protected by flying things and things on the ground. If there are things on the ground, then you may not be able to reach it by flying."

"But if there are flying guardians, you can probably get part way there by flying."

"Good thing you're good on a broom, Lovegood."

"I'm up against Krum, though. I may be good, but he's a professional."

"But can he fight the guardians when he's on a broom?"

"If he can dodge, then it doesn't matter."

And the discussion went on. Harry called it an early night, while the "Pit crew" discussed possible guardians and counter measures.

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Harry was much less nervous in the weeks leading up to the task. The "Pit crew" was also calmer. First, they had more time to prepare. Second, for at least the flying guardians they had a small number that were likely be used. Dragons were right out, but various flying horses and variants were expected. Luna suggested Thestrals as the hard to see guardians. The ground guardians could be almost anything, and they just reviewed what Harry had learned for the first task. Unfortunately, because Hogwarts was unplottable, there were no maps that showed the area around it. Harry took some broom flights to see Mount Dowdes as well as he could. He was intercepted by Madam Hooch the first time he flew up -- he deduced that she was monitoring broom flights of the Champions. He wasn't allowed to fly to it, as it was about ten miles (eighteen kilometers) away. But he felt he got as good a view of it as he could. The Scottish Highlands didn't look much like the glacier carved areas of the Rocky Mountains he had visited, but he thought he could hike to the top, if he had to. The snow wasn't thick currently, but he still hoped he wouldn't have to do too much hiking. All-in-all, he felt that he wouldn't embarrass himself during the second task.

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His nervousness returned the night before the Second Task. After a poor night's sleep he got up early and waited in the common room for Luna. She showed up, and they went down for an early breakfast. He didn't want to eat, but Luna insisted that he do so. As they were heading out of the Great Hall, Professor Flitwick intercepted them. He asked to talk to Luna, and suggested that Harry get ready, as the contest began at 9:30 that morning. Harry was well aware of the minutes ticking off until start time. He went up to his dorm, and got dressed as he would have if he were in the mountains of the New World. He wore his hiking boots and layers of warm clothes. He slipped the knife that Sirius had given him into his boot with a sticking and cushioning charm. He felt better having it. He put some extra

clothes and a water bottle into a backpack, grabbed his Fireball, and went down to the common room. He found he couldn't sit still, and paced a little before heading towards the Entrance Hall. There was a steady stream of students heading for the Quidditch pitch, which was where the contest would start. He met some friends heading out, and joined them. They walked to the pitch together, and Harry said goodbye as they headed up to the stands, and he walked through to the field.

The first thing he noticed was the large mirrors set up facing the stands. The next thing that caught his attention was the goal posts had been removed. He didn't think they would interfere with the task, as most of the action would be several miles away. And if they would -- if there was more to this than the clue gave -- then the mirrors would be an even bigger hindrance. The final thing that he noticed was the ruins -- the pitch was covered with what seemed to be Roman ruins. There were columns, part walls, half buildings, and gate posts. He didn't get a good look at it, because Hagrid directed him into a pavilion that was set up near the center of the pitch, which was clear of the ruins. Inside he waited almost a half hour before the other champions showed up. He saw that each of them had a broom, too. He was the only one with a backpack, he realized.

"Now that you're all here, step outside, and I'll let you and everyone else know what the next task is," Ludo Bagman said, in a jovial voice. He put a Sonorus charm on his throat, and everyone in the stadium could hear him.

"Champions, students, guests! The second task of the Triwizard tournament is a rescue mission. Each of these students has had someone important to them taken and magically bound. If they deciphered the golden egg they know where. They need to rescue their charge and bring them safely back. Oh, and there are various obstacles in the way. They aren't intending to harm you, but they could accidentally. And you're not supposed to harm them, either." At this, Bagman gave a scowl at Krum who had used a Conjunctivitis curse on his dragon. "One other thing, put these on," Bagman handed around necklaces with heavily rune engraved pendants. "That will allow us to watch you and come to your aid should you need it. Good luck, you may head off when I lower my wand."

Harry quickly mounted his broom, and noticed that Bagman was waiting until they were all ready. As the wand came down, the four champions launched into the air. Krum, on his state-of-the-art, professional Quidditch broom, was soon far ahead. Harry found himself outdistancing Cedric and Fleur. As he left the pitch, he noticed that the mirrors were showing images of the contestants. He looked at the necklace he wore. It was some sort of scrying device, and the mirrors were the receivers. He resolved to look into that, and returned to paying attention to his flight. He flew into the stiff wind, heading towards a particular bit of Scottish Highland.

A few minutes of flying had him approaching Mount Dowdes. It was fairly steep on this side, but the side away from the castle was supposed to be more climbable. As he began to gain altitude, he caught sight of one of the guardians, a hippogriff. The giant eagle-horse dove towards him, and Harry banked away hard, trying to avoid the beast. The hippogriff adjusted its dive, and he almost didn't make it. As Harry sped past it the hippogriff flapped its wings rapidly to stall its dive and regain height. Harry thought he was safe until another flying creature swept by him, jostling his broom. This creature had the front of a giant eagle and the hindquarters of a lion, a griffin. They were slightly slower than hippogriffs, but stronger and heavier. The leonine rear paw raked the back of the broom while Harry was diving, and he spun out of control. He struggled to stay on the broom, then to control it. He succeeded, and as he pulled up, he saw the two guardians circling above him. He aimed down and flew into the trees.

Flying as quickly as he dared, he maneuvered the broom between the trees and the branches. Being February, there were no leaves on the trees, so they didn't really give him much cover from the two guardians who had decided he was the thing they were guarding against. Harry flew towards the "back" of the mountain, in the hopes that that side would be tree covered. As he made his way, at times slowly, he noticed other flying guardians. He assumed they were tracking either Fleur or Cedric. Harry didn't waste any time thinking about it, though.

He increased his speed, and moved to the top of the trees. He decided that he would have to dare the 'griffs' to get the increased

speed. Keeping one eye on the tree-top terrain he was flying over, and one on the sky above, he caught one of 'his' fliers swooping towards him out of the corner of his eye. He dove into the trees, and the large shadow passed over him. This happened several more times. The hippogriff and the griffin seemed to be taking turns. He decided to see if he could clean up the skies -- at least around him. He slowed his speed and watched the griffin diving towards him. He spun the broom to face the winged beast and dropped among the branches of the tree below. The griffin extended its giant wingspan and started pulling out of the dive. Harry dropped a little more and aimed his wand at the creature. The griffin must have understood what was going on and tried to angle away. But in order to do that, it had to bank, and Harry had drawn it too close to the trees -- its lower wing hit some twigs. It managed to straighten itself and started raising its wings to give a mighty flap that would have pulled it free of the danger. That was the signal Harry had been waiting on, and he hit it with a stunner right in the face. The wings stopped their upward motion and Harry cast a quick levitation spell on the falling creature. He felt the strain on his magic as he slowed the griffin's descent, and quickly lowered it into a clearing.

As he was about to breath a sigh of relief, he was knocked off his broom by a something big, heavy, and covered with white feathers. The hippogriff had decided to help its fellow guardian, and Harry fell onto the branches of the tree he was hovering over. His wand fell from his hand as he grasped at a branch, but didn't get a good hold and it slipped away as he continued down. Another hit his side, and he brought his arms down to trap it. With a lot of pain in his armpit and the help of his other hand, he stopped his downward motion. He grimaced, held tight, and placed his feet on a lower branch. Once he had his weight on his feet, he got both hands on the branch that had stopped his fall. He made his way towards the tree trunk and started climbing down. A few times he had to hug the trunk and slide to a lower branch when there weren't any close enough to climb to. The final branch put him about six feet off the ground. The trunk split here, and he couldn't get his arms around either trunk. He crouched as low as he could and jumped down. He hit the ground hard, and groaned as his ankle took a little too much of the impact.

He tested his leg, and didn't think anything was broken, so he started looking for his wand and broom. The broom was stuck in the branches above him, but the wand was lying in the snow. It took him a few minutes, but he had no choice -- without it, he doubted he could continue. He summoned the broom, mounted it, and took off, keeping low in the woods. He didn't want to meet the hippogriff again.

After a few minutes, he gained some altitude and increased his speed. He was on the eastern side of the mountain now. It wasn't as steep as the west, and the Forbidden Forest covered more of the slope than the cliffs allowed on the western side. He kept a sharp lookout for more flying guardians, but didn't see any. He increased his speed again, reaching the limit of the Fireball. He flew beyond the forest, and thought he saw the goal -- there were some gray, round things at the top of the mountain, but he couldn't make out much more than that.

There was also someone hiking ahead. He dove towards the ground as soon as that registered. He wasn't sure, but he thought he felt a change in the wind when he did that. He flew over the snow, aiming at the walking figure as fast as he could go. He choked up on the broom a bit. His earlier tumble into the tree had ripped his winter cloak, and cold air was channeling through the hole and under his left arm. He guessed that the awkward hold was why he was knocked off his broom when he was suddenly buffeted by a gust of wind that may have been from an invisible wing beating right next to him.

He hit the ground and rolled, ending up with a face full of snow. He sprang to his feet and scanned the sky, but no further attack came. He magically dried himself, and summoned his broom. He mounted his broom again but hadn't gone more than a dozen meters before he was knocked off again. This time he felt the wing that hit him and heard the snort of some sort of creature. Again, he searched the sky, but could find nothing.

With no way to counter the invisible flier, he gave up on the broom and decided to continue on foot. He guessed that he was a kilometer from the top with a rise of a hundred or more meters. He used a sticking charm to attach his broom to his back and started hiking. An hour later he could see both the goal and his competitors. He met

Victor coming down. The Bulgarian had Daphne Greengrass floating in front of him. She was in some sort of gray, semi-transparent bag. He was using the Mobilicorpus spell to float her, and Harry smiled to himself as he greeted the obviously frustrated Durmstrang student. There was a limit to the speed you could make a body float when you used the Mobilicorpus charm. He continued towards the top of the mountain.

He caught up with the other competitor he had been following shortly before reaching their goal.

"Hello, Fleur!" he called.

"ello, 'Arry," she replied. "Theeze shoes, they are not good in the snow." She cast another drying spell on the shoes in question. She was carrying her broom over her shoulder.

"I wore my hiking boots. I think those are our treasures," Harry said, pointing at the gray balloons swaying in the stiff wind. He was glad it was coming from behind.

"I saw you knocked off your broom. You are fine, yes?"

"Oui. A little knocked around, but mostly fine."

They stopped and gazed at the next part of the task. Their "treasures", Luna in Harry's case, a small girl in Fleur's, and Cho Chang, Cedric's date from the Yule ball, were floating about five meters above them in large gray, semi-transparent balloons. They seemed to be asleep. The balloons were tied to thick, iron rings embedded in the mountain. The knot they were tied with looked overly large to Harry. He grabbed the rope and pulled. The balloon moved reluctantly against the wind, but it did move. He watched as Fleur cast a spell at the balloon, causing a hole in it. It slowly deflated, and, even though Harry thought it was unnecessary because of the slowness of the leak, she cast a levitation charm on the whole thing so that her kidnap victim wouldn't hurt herself when the thing reached the ground.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"It eez my sister, Gabrielle."

Harry removed the sticking charm on his broom, and took off his backpack. He pulled out a thermos, and offered Fleur some hot chocolate. She thanked him, and he poured himself a cup as he conjured a fire.

"You are not rescuing your wife?" Fleur asked, as she cast another unsuccessful spell at the gray encased Gabrielle.

"I'm thinking of something. If we can't go faster than Victor, he's going to win."

"And you know how to go faster?"

Harry laughed. "Yes. Cast a feather light charm on her, and you can run faster than a Mobilicorpus."

"But that eez not what you are going to do, n'est pas?"

"Non," Harry smiled. Fleur gave up trying to get Gabrielle out of the gray material.

Harry said, "I was afraid of that, when I saw Victor carrying Daphne down the slope. I think they'll stay asleep until we get back to the Quidditch pitch. If they were awake, we could just have them sit on our brooms. I think this is part of the task -- find the best way to move them."

Harry looked to the west. Hogwarts was visible beyond the thick forest. He also observed a number of huge winged creatures between him and it. Right below him was a cliff, and beyond that, very steep slopes. He was glad he wasn't afraid of heights. He also wondered about the plan he had come up with.

Fleur struggled with the knot that still held Gabrielle to the mountain top.

"It eez like zee bladder. I cannot cut zee rope with a spell." She was manually untying the rope. Now Harry understood the reason behind the big knot.

He grasped the rope leading to Luna's balloon encased body and pulled. Hand over hand he slowly pulled her down.

"There eez a faster way to get back, 'Arry. Bye bye!" Harry turned his head to see Fleur with her sister in her hand and the broom under her arm, just standing still. He kept pulling the rope as she stood there.

"There eez something wrong! I cannot Disapparate!"

"You can't Apparate on Hogwarts' grounds. But I guess either you can't do it from here, or the gray stuff is stopping you, also."

"I fear you are correct. What are you doing?"

"I think I'm going for a ride on a balloon."

He had pulled Luna down to within touching distance. Holding the rope with one hand, he used the other to wrap coils of it around the metal ring. Once he felt that it would stay, he let go. The balloon pulled the rope, but Harry was busy tying the balloon's rope to the ring. This knot would come undone with just a tug. He put on his backpack, and tied his broom to the rope. He used a sticking charm on it, just to be sure he wouldn't lose it. He pulled out his knife, and cut the rope near the gorgon knot. The balloon was still held by the knot Harry tied. He then tied two more loops of rope a little beyond where the broom was attached. Sticking his feet in those loops he turned them into foot rests. He turned to Fleur to say goodbye.

She had already left, though. She had Gabrielle tied or stuck to her back, and was heading down the mountain to the east on her broom. Harry saw her dodge something, but didn't see what she was dodging. He hadn't asked if she could see the Thestrals. He grasped the rope tightly, reached down, and pulled the release on his knot. The wind immediately blew the balloon (with him attached) over the cliff.

This was the part that he wasn't sure of. If he fell too fast, he could get hurt (or killed) before he could do anything about it. But he didn't fall too fast. They were falling, and the wind knocked him around terribly, but they were pushed away from the cliff. He was swaying quickly and spinning slowly. The rope loops that he had his feet in held most of his weight, but he was wishing he had something similar to put his arms through. He noticed his hands cramping as they held on way too tight. He adjusted himself, wrapping his arms around the rope. He didn't think it possible while he was flying, but he was getting dizzy.

He jerked violently. One of the griffins had hit the balloon with its wing. Another flew by too closely, Harry thought, but they couldn't get at him without running into the rope. Another hit the balloon and Harry held on to the rope for his life. He had no opportunity to get his wand out, and just hoped that he would survive.

He's not sure how long the attacks went on, or how many times the balloon (and once he) was hit by giant wings, but eventually he reached the treetops and the creatures stopped attacking. As his feet ran into the branches, he put the next part of his plan into action. The broom was attached to the rope, tied closer to the balloon than where his feet were, so it was mostly against his body. He took one foot out of the rope stirrup and put it around the broom. He carefully used one hand to level off the broom, and activated it. Suddenly he was no longer hanging, he was flying.

He found that he couldn't fly at the broom's top speed -- the balloon had too much drag, but he did make good time.

When he flew into the Quidditch stadium, Luna in her balloon floating behind him, he found that he was the first champion to return.

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Author Notes: The story of Amelia Bones' reaction to a howler comes from the fic Honourable Substitutes by Kimon the Potterplace3 Yahoo group

For a working version of Dodge-spell, see JBerns' Bungle in the Jungle on Fanfictionauthors dot org.

And last, but not least, thanks to my betas Swordchucks and Evan Mayerle.

Chapter 19

The third task

Harry couldn't believe it! By some miracle, he was the first back. He landed, deflated the balloon Luna was in, and watched as she was removed from the gray material by Professor Flitwick. He and Luna were given seats in the special section set aside for the returning champions near the Judge's table. Fleur flew in about fifteen minutes later, and Harry thought it was just luck that he arrived before her. They watched in the mirrors as Cedric fought with the gray material and Victor flew through the trees of the Forbidden Forest with Daphne tied to the bottom of his broom. Harry found out later that Cedric was so late because he had been driven into the forest and encountered a group of Cornish Pixies who had stolen his broom. He had lost a lot of time fighting them.

Harry watched Victor fly his broom around a tree. From the way they moved, he deduced that Victor hadn't thought about lightening Daphne. Luna didn't know what happened after Professor Flitwick brought her and Cho to the Quidditch stadium after breakfast, so Harry filled her in while watching the last two champions complete the task.

To the astonishment of the judges, (and happy excitement of Professor Flitwick who had devised it,) Cedric succeeded in extricating Cho from the balloon. They both got on the broom, Cho sitting behind Cedric and wrapping her arms around him. Then they launched over the cliff. Harry thought Cedric's flying was amazing. Going from a power dive to horizontal flight, Harry was sure that he had chosen his path carefully to avoid as many 'griffs as possible. The pair tilted in unison as they flew around one white winged creature after another. Harry counted at least four near misses. Cho, being a good flier herself, moved in unison with Cedric. Harry doubted that he could have made the same moves with Luna on his broom.

Victor reached the edge of the Forest, and sped up. People (on Harry's side of the stadium) stopped watching the magic mirrors and

concentrated on the figures flying towards the pitch. Cedric beat Victor by a broom length. The crowd cheered.

After all the champions were back, the mirrors magically put themselves away and the champions were asked to wait at the starting pavilion for their scores.

After a few minutes of consultation, Bagman stood up, looked at the other judges, and touched his throat with his wand.

"Witches and wizards, friends, family, champions! Here are the scores, already tallied. For Victor Krum, being the last to arrive back at the pitch, and losing points for killing a Thestral during the contest, although one judge felt his arriving first at the mountain top deserved extra points, he gets twenty-five."

Harry noticed that Bagman had looked at Karkaroff when he spoke of getting extra points. The cheering was more than just the Durmstrang students. Harry clapped along with them, as did the other champions. Victor seemed a little confused by the sincerity expressed by the other competitors.

"Cedric Diggory received extra points for the excellent charms work used to free his kidnap victim. He was also the only contestant to encounter one of the swarms of Cornish Pixies, but that's the way it sometimes happens. He received twenty-eight points."

There was cheering from a lot of the crowd as Hogwarts congratulated its own. Victor joined the other champions in clapping for Cedric, although he wasn't very enthusiastic.

"Second to arrive was Fleur Delacour, awarded points for a nearly flawless performance. She receives thirty two points."

She received her applause with a smile and gave her sister a hug.

"And finally, Harry Lovegood arrived back first, receiving points for ingenious tactics and making sure the griffin wasn't harmed by his actions. He receives 38 points and is now in the lead."

Harry wasn't sure if his applause was louder than Cedric's, but then he didn't care. He was in this for the fun and because he had to. If he won, that would be nice. He was a lot less worried about just surviving, now. He had to admit that his plan of riding the balloon through the guardians was pretty dangerous, but it had seemed a good idea at the time. And it had been exhilarating.

Bagman continued with the snippet of information for the last task.

"The third and final task will be held at noon on May 31. This will again be a test of magical skill, but also of leadership and teamwork. You will be given further instruction three days before the contest."

Dumbledore stepped forward then and said, with a slight scowl, "You will also be required to answer under Veritaserum if you have received any outside help or information about the upcoming contest. There was a report of possible cheating on the first contest, and this will not be tolerated. Do I make myself clear?" At that he turned to the other judges. Karkaroff scowled, Maxime put on an indignant expression, and Bagman looked anywhere but at Dumbledore. They were then dismissed.

Luna, who had been waiting until after the official end of the task, grabbed Harry in a tight hug. Once again, Selene and Larry, and, this time, Uncles Ollie, Sirius, and Remus were waiting for him. They had a family reunion and stopped in the Great Hall where snacks had been set out for an impromptu party with all the spectators and champions (except for the Durmstrang group, who went back to their ship).

The party continued in the Ravenclaw common room after the outside guests had left. As the party was winding down they asked about the next contest. He told them that he didn't know any more than what they heard from Bagman, but he wasn't going to worry about it for a few months. He got an agreement from his support group to leave him alone until the first of May. They had N.E.W.T.s to study for, anyway.

He was a bit dazed by the whole experience. He had originally been worried about just staying alive, and now he was first in the standings.

People were talking about him actually winning! He smiled when he heard that and wondered if it was possible.

At the party, he kept his hand in Luna's. He felt that he could face anything as long as she was next to him, and he was feeling a bit intimidated by all the attention he was getting.

She finally asked to go to bed. She let him off without brushing her hair, and he gave a "public" kiss at the base of the steps to the girls' dorms. Harry went to bed soon after that.

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Things got back to normal, or as normal as they got around a school of magic. They carved runes in wood, plaster, clay, and stone. They broke down, resolved, decoded, and rebuilt Arithmancy problems. They transformed animals, brewed potions, charmed objects, learned history, and practiced "Constant vigilance!" They played Snap, gobstones, and those who cared for it, chess. Mike Daley introduced the wizarding world to Parcheesi, Risk, and Clue. The wizards in turn introduced him to Jumanji.

Harry, Mike, Colin Creevey, Liz Erickson, and Mary Shake worked on creating a Wizarding Monopoly. Instead of the utilities they had Hogwarts and St. Mungos. Instead of Park Place and Broadwalk they had Diagon Alley and Fae Street (the wizard street in Dublin). They were having trouble coming up with other places, though. The railroads also gave them trouble, but they settled on The Apparition Department, the Floo Network, Nimbus Company, and Persians' Carpets (the biggest flying carpet maker in the Near East). It was an ongoing project.

Luna went to Charms Club and Harry and Neville and a few other students got Dueling help from Professor Flitwick. It wasn't an actual club, and he warned them if it became too popular and thus more time consuming, he'd call an end to it, so those in the unofficial club kept quiet about it.

Easter break came and the Lovegoods had a relaxing time together. Selene and Larry didn't mention anything about their little group to

Harry and Luna. They did ask if it would be alright if Sirius told Hestia and Remus told his girlfriend Tonks about Harry's real identity. Harry didn't want to, but eventually allowed Hestia to know, because Sirius was marrying her. He wanted to wait on Tonks until that relationship looked like it was going to be permanent, too. Selene and Larry accepted his decision.

Also over the Easter break Harry had a couple of sessions with Sirius as he tried to complete his animagus transformation. He wasn't any more successful than over Christmas holiday.

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Summer term started and soon there was just one month until final task. Harry's self imposed vacation from the Triwizard was over. He called the "Pit crew" together May 1st, and held the meeting in the unused classroom one floor down from the Ravenclaw Tower entrance. He insisted that Luna and Neville be there, too.

"What's up, Lovegood?" Ragingstorm asked.

"The third task."

"They tell you anything more about it?"

"No, just that it will test our magical skill, leadership, and teamwork."

"Leadership and teamwork? How are they going to do that?"

"I don't know. But I have some ideas," Harry answered. "Teamwork could be tested by giving us a task that required that the champions work together to complete it. But that wouldn't test our leadership. One of us would have to be in charge, but unless they forced the others to accept me, they wouldn't take me as their leader. So I'm thinking we'll still be in competition, but we'll each have to make our own teams and lead them."

"Doing what?"

"That, I can't begin to guess."

"And why is he here?" one of the seventh years asked about Neville.

"Because Neville and I trained last summer. We know each other's strengths and weaknesses already. He's going to be on my team."

"How big a team?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't guess that either."

Ragingstorm spoke slowly, thinking as she did. "It can't be smaller than a team of three; having one leader and one follower doesn't really test leadership. I would guess it isn't open ended, either. If you could field a team of two hundred wizards, even if they're students, they could take down a nundu."

"Yeah, but how many would still be alive afterwards," a seventh year boy asked.

"Not many. But it would be a test of leadership to see if the leader survived."

"Like Fudge -- leading from behind."

Harry pulled the conversation back on track. "Anyway, if I remember right, they'll tell us three days before the contest. My guess is that's so we can get our team together, and work on teamwork. With only three days, I don't think they want a large team. So my guess is no more than ten, and probably not that many."

"But what will the teams do?"

Harry smiled. "Think about it -- a competition between teams of witches and wizards?" He looked around.

Neville was the one who came up with the answer first.

"Combat."

With seven seventh year Ravenclaws, Luna, and Neville, Harry and the group worked out signals, formations that used some people to attack and others to defend, transformation in combat (a topic not talked about much in Defense, and definitely not practiced), first aid, and spell lists. They deduced from Krum's loss of points for harming the dragon eggs and the thestral, that spells that hurt the other teams would be frowned upon and cause point loss. They also worked on plays for fewer than ten people -- as few as three. Everyone had to practice the new formations, they could (and probably would) end up with fewer people during the task, and they couldn't guarantee who the remaining players would be. The schedules of the students affected the practices, as the seventh years (and fourth and third years a few days) had to break off for school work. But they progressed.

As the days counted down towards the contest several incidents happened. The Quidditch stadium was hidden behind a magical darkness. No one could see what was going on inside.

Harry reminded the team of the fake "ruins" they saw inside the pitch during the second task. There might be an obstacle course aspect to the fight. They knew from their research that obstacle courses were popular for the third task. Their variety was almost frightening.

The other thing that happened was they noticed that the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students also seemed to have worked out that they needed to practice teamwork. Harry smiled to himself when he saw that. He had kept his exercises in the large dungeon room in which he had played Dodge Spell until one week before the announcement of the details of the contest. It was deliberate on their part. They needed outside practice, but wanted to wait until the last minute. They had also worked out a set of signals for communicating between groups over a distance, and needed to make sure they were visible in the afternoon sun.

But they also wanted to see if they could observe the other teams practicing. And they could, from the astronomy tower using some sets of Omnioculars. They met each night in the classroom beneath the Ravenclaw tower.

"What have we learned?"

One of the fifth years that had been drafted to do spying stood up and brought out his notes.

"Durmstrang continued their practice with three teams. It seemed each of the teams had four people. Lots of stunners and shielding spells."

Harry nodded. Since they had started practicing, the Durmstrang group had used teams of four. That could be because they brought a dozen people and teams of four worked out well, or it could be inside knowledge.

"Meanwhile the Beauxbatons started with a group of eight, but switched to two groups of six. They also were rotating people into Fleur's team. It tells me that they, like us, are not sure how many people are going to be on the team."

"Finally, a new development: Cedric and a group of twelve people went to the other side of the Quidditch stadium where we couldn't see them."

"YES!" Harry exclaimed.

"What?" Ragingstorm asked.

"I was afraid Cedric wouldn't get the hint."

"You mean you wanted him to guess what we're doing?"

"Yes. He is the real Hogwarts champion. I wouldn't mind if he won. I'm going to try my hardest, but if Cedric wins, I'm going to be happy."

"But he raises a good question -- Beauxbatons and Durmstrang each brought a dozen students. What if we were wrong, and the teams will be a dozen? Do we have time to get anyone else up to speed?"

"Kieth and Dorothy?" someone suggested.

Ragingstorm nodded. "Why don't you go get them? We can fill them in on the signals and strategies tonight, and start them practicing on spell accuracy and review our spell list tomorrow."

Harry agreed, and they spent the rest of the evening working with the new people.

As Neville was leaving, he said, "You know, Harry, I could have let slip what we were doing while in earshot of Cedric."

"I know, but this way he can say that no one told him. I am a little worried about our Veritaserum questioning."

"You didn't cheat, did you?"

"No."

"Then don't worry about it."

But Harry did worry about it. He sent off a note to Larry and Selene about his worry. They sent back a note saying they would be at the questioning and he shouldn't worry.

The last few days before the meeting, they worked with a team of 12, officially. At other times, away from the rest of the Ravensclaws, he worked with Neville and Luna, practicing speed casting, shielding, and accuracy. They basically practiced the training they received from Mad Eye Moody the previous summer.

Friday, May 29, Harry was instructed to be in the Great Hall for dinner. Selene and Larry had shown up and ate with Luna and Harry at the Ravenclaw table. After dinner they went with Harry, the other three champions, the four judges, Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape into the private dining room where they had assembled after the Goblet of Fire had chosen them.

Bagman began, "Well, here we are, to find out what you're going to be facing on Monday. You'll have the weekend to prepare, so good luck to you all. The final task will be you and a team of your choosing, up to four people in a team, in a race to be the first one to reach the

prize. It will be like a game of 'capture the flag,' if you've ever played that Muggle game. Points will be taken for harming the other players, but incapacitating them is perfectly fine."

Dumbledore looked at the other judges briefly, and continued, "You all know the rules of the tournament. You were not to receive any information from your instructors on the details of the tasks. You will be given Veritaserum to confirm compliance. You will only be asked about the third task, as you were given fair warning that this would happen. Mr. Lovegood, being under age, will have his guardians supervise the administration, and have been provided with a set of the questions that will be asked. We will begin with him."

"Professor Snape, if you please."

"I have spent the last month brewing this: Veritaserum, the truth potion. It is as pure as alchemical science can make it. You will each receive three drops."

Harry sat in a chair, opened his mouth, and received three drops of the elixir. It didn't taste bad. Why don't other potions have that taste, he wondered, as he felt a warmth of good feelings flow through him. He resisted. Then he heard a voice like it was far away, and he felt that he should answer the question and he'll feel even better. This felt like the time he was put under the Imperius curse.

Dumbledore asked, "Did anyone give you any knowledge of third task?"

Harry felt like he wanted to give a speech, but kept his answer short, and factual. "Yes, Mr. Bagman."

Bagman's eyes opened wide and he started sputtering denials.

Dumbledore turned to the Lovegoods, "I'd like to ask him about that, please?" They consented.

"When did he give you this information, Mr. Lovegood?"

"At the end of the second task. He announced it to everyone."

"Nothing wrong with what I did!" Badman said, relieved.

"Did anyone since then give you any help on the third task?"

"Yes, lots of people."

"Who?"

"Most of the students in Ravenclaw N.E.W.T.s classes."

Karkaroff blurted out, "Does everybody in this whole school know?"

Harry answered, "I assume only the teachers know, and probably not all of them."

"He is resisting the potion, Headmaster," Snape said.

"He's lying!" Karkaroff insisted.

"No," the potion master replied. "Everything he says is true. He's just not talking as much as most people would under Veritaserum."

Selene spoke up. "If I may be allowed to try?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"Harry, did anyone with knowledge of the third task give you information about besides Mr. Bagman when he announced it?"

"Not that I know."

Karkaroff interrupted again, "Then how did you know to practice with a team?"

Madam Maxime nodded, "That I would like to know, too."

"I thought about it. It was the only thing that made sense."

Selene glared at the others; then asked, "So, no one gave you inside information on the third task?"

"No."

Selene looked at the judges, and asked, "Any further questions?"

Harry answered, "Yes. Why did Krum only train with groups of four?"

"I wasn't asking you," Selene said.

They had no more questions for Harry, and they moved on to Cedric, Fleur, and Victor. It seemed that after they saw Harry's group practicing outside, the others figured out what he might be doing. Victor had been forced to sit down and work it out by Karkaroff, but they couldn't get him to say that Karkaroff actually told him anything. It's just that Karkaroff wouldn't let him do anything until he came up with the right answer. The other judges decided that the Durmstrang team would be penalized a point for the inappropriate help. Karkaroff was angry, but couldn't do anything about it. The meeting broke up soon after that.

Harry, Selene, and Larry re-entered the Great Hall to find the tables re-configured for the nightly study hall. The Ravenclaws were there making this the first time the seventh year table had been used. Harry quickly informed them that the team would be 4 people, and there would be try outs for the two open slots the next morning. He insisted that Luna was going to be on his team. He could see the resentment in a number of the student's faces, but they weren't going to say anything with Selene and Larry right beside him. He did introduce his guardians to his "pit crew" and told them what help each had given in the previous tasks. His appreciation of what they had already done helped to alleviate some of the anger.

Selene and Larry sat with the third years for a little while, reminiscing about their time at Hogwarts (and how things seemed to have changed -- like the inter-house study group). They visited for a little while, until Selene picked up the students (at least the Ravenclaw students) desire to get back to homework. They said their goodbyes

and promised to be at the final task on Monday. They also promised a surprise after the task.

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"Wormtail!"

"Yes, my lord!"

"Is everything prepared?"

"Yes, my lord. The potion will be complete by Monday. Our hireling will signal when he is ready to have the trophy enchanted. By the end of Monday you will have a body."

"I do not like the fact that it is Walpurgis. That is too light for me to be completely comfortable."

Pettigrew kept his mouth closed, and looked away from the distorted creature that housed his master's spirit.

Voldemort sensed his disagreement. "You think that the day doesn't matter? Yet why do we do rituals on All Hallows Eve and the winter solstice? Some days are better for magic than others. I will overcome the day. Nothing will stand in my way."

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Harry wiped his brow. The day wasn't particularly warm, but he was worn out from both the activities and the feeling of responsibility. He and Luna had set up a series of tests to choose the other two members of the team. There was a simple ward (that Harry had to keep replacing) that the candidates had to get past. Then there was a spell shooting gallery, with points for both accuracy and speed, and a short interview with Harry that usually included a demonstration of spells. There was also a dodging contest, with Neville casting spells, and a test of the contestants shield. When it was Neville's turn, Harry was the one casting spells at him.

Ragingstorm had the quickest time getting through the ward. She also was the most accurate with her spells, but not the fastest at casting them. Harry weighted accuracy a bit more than speed, his reasoning being that getting one spell off that hits it's target is better than two that don't. She was also good at dodging.

Second place was surprising. Harry insisted that Neville try out, since he had been practicing with the group since Harry recruited them. He was very fast and accurate enough, so that his score came in second. Shields were powered by the magical strength of the caster, and Neville showed that he was a powerful wizard. Harry also was happy that he didn't have an all Ravenclaw team.

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The four practiced shielding themselves and each other. They came up with a default plan of attack, so they wouldn't target the same person if they got into a spell fight with another team. They made sure they knew their hand and wand signals so they could communicate without telling the other teams what their plans were should they get separated.

Ragingstorm kept complaining about missing a whole weekend of N.E.W.T. study, but every time Harry offered to replace her, she declined.

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Sunday afternoon found Larry and Selene, in the Ministry of Magic talking to Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

"This is it," Larry said. "From what Crouch, Jr. said, this was a Voldemort plot, and tomorrow is the last chance to do whatever he wanted to do. Any possibility that he's using our attention on the contest to keep us busy and attack somewhere else?"

Amelia shook her head. "Of course, anything is possible, but Crouch said that the plot was to kidnap Neville. Harry's in there instead, and from what I learned from the headmaster, Neville will be in Harry's

team. They should be visible to everyone for the whole task. I can't see how they could do it. But just in case, I'll have several Aurors stationed around the field for the sole purpose of watching Harry and Neville."

"Are you going to be there tomorrow?"

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss this for the world!"

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He finished packing the office. Now he had only his personal items from his bedroom left. He'd finish that in the morning. It was like 1935 all over again -- he was running for his life. Well, not exactly the same. Then he had been running from the thing that guarded the Grail. This time there was very little chance of someone finding out what he had done. But "very little chance" could still mean some chance, and if that chance happened, he would have his trunk in his pocket, ready to go. If no one figured out that he had done it -- then he'd be teaching class again tomorrow as usual.

Giles Tumulty mused that with the money Voldemort's servant had given him, he was set for several years. But money had many uses. There was a supposedly magic stone that he might be able to acquire in Africa: The End of Desire, once embedded in the crown of Suleiman ben Daood. He'd have to see if his contacts were still in place. . . .

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Monday morning found Harry pacing the Ravenclaw common room. Luna and Liz Ragingstorm calmly studied.

"Harry, go flying or something. All this worrying isn't helping."

"I can't. They won't let me. They think I'll fly through the black screen around the Quidditch pitch and see the obstacle course."

"Then go for a walk to the lake. Just stop pacing. It's annoying," Luna answered, without looking up.

"Alright! I'll see you in the Great Hall at eleven."

"Good."

Luna's voice took on a dreamy sound as her eyes lost focus. "Don't forget to bring Sirius' knife."

Harry looked at her for a moment, and headed up the stairs. A clarification of the rules had said that they could only use their wands. But Harry had learned that when Luna sounded like that, she was right. He put the knife in his boot, and hoped that the judges didn't find it.

- - -

The team did meet in the Great Hall at eleven. Neville, Liz, Luna, and Harry, and an Auror that Harry had found was following him once he left the Ravenclaw tower, had a quick meal, and were escorted to the Quidditch pitch. When Harry had been outside, the black, privacy magic surrounding it had still been in place. Now the stands were visible, and Professor Flitwick led his team to the north end of the stadium and in through a door. Flitwick kept apologizing that he couldn't give them any help, but wished them well in the task. They entered the pitch.

The interior had been expanded. It was now almost a half kilometer long. The ruins they had seen before were now spread across it. The whole thing depressed like a bowl with the center the lowest point -- he assumed that was to give the spectators easy viewing of the proceedings. There was a river -- or, perhaps more accurately, a moat -- running all the way around the field less than half way down. There were two bridges across it, on the east side and on the west side. It looked as if the pitch wasn't as wide as it was long, maybe 400 meters. Fleur Delacour's team and an adult that he didn't recognize were just on the inside of the tunnel under the stands that Harry's team came through. Harry smiled and walked over to her.

"Good luck on the third task, Fleur."

"An' you, 'Arry."

They shook hands, and he returned to his group. They watched the stands filling up.

They were led away from the other group to the north-east corner. The Beauxbatons group was led to the north-west corner. They would not be in direct competition for crossing the bridge. He could see the group at the south-east corner wasn't Cedric's Hufflepuff's so he assumed it was Durmstrang. They were too far away to get a good look, though. Flitwick was handing out chains and pendants.

"You have to wear these. If you get seriously injured they will automatically portkey you to the healers. It won't work for any other reason, but you are forbidden from taking it off. You will lose points if you hex to maim any of your human opponents. Should you desire to be rescued from anything, just shoot sparks from your wand into the air. I believe there will be a final announcement in a few minutes. Good luck, Mr. Lovegood and all of you. I'd say make Ravenclaw proud, but with Mr. Longbottom here, I'll say make Hogwarts proud!"

"Thank you professor. We will," Harry answered, and shook the little man's hand. He turned to the others.

"The bridge will be a bottleneck. Anyone interested in bypassing it?"

"How?" Neville wanted to know.

"Levitation? Two people levitate the other two. Then we return the favor."

"I don't know. The moat looks about ten meters wide. Can someone on the other side levitate the ones who are left?"

"I think I can," Harry answered.

"Then you go over first. Who else?"

"Who else thinks they can get a levitate at that distance?"

"Maybe," Neville said.

"OK, Neville and I first, then we get you two."

Meanwhile someone was flying over the field on a broom. He must have cast a Sonorus charm because soon everyone in the stadium could hear him.

"Witches and wizards, students, guests, and champions! Welcome to the final task of the renewed Triwizard Tournament! The goal is to be the first to get the winners cup, which is placed in the middle of the field. The obstacles include traps, creatures, and your fellow competitors. Part of the score will be the students' knowledge of what they are facing -- any rare creatures must be subdued with the minimum of harm to them. Extremely dangerous spells cast on the other contestants will also cause loss of points. At the sound of the canon, the contest will begin! Good luck, and may the best team win!"

The canon sounded, and Harry's group raced towards the moat. It may have been only ten meters wide, but the ground around it was very swampy, and they couldn't get all the way to the moat because of that. Once their feet were in the muck, Liz pointed her wand at Harry and cast "Leviosa!" Harry started floating over the swamp, but as he neared the water the spell gave way, and he fell into the swamp.

"Hey!"

"It's not my fault! There must be some anti magic field around it! They want us to use the bridge!"

"It's all over the swamp," Luna said.

"You could have warned me," Harry grumbled, drying off. "We can't go to the bridge, now. We lost too much time! Krum will have someone there to hold us back." Harry slogged back to the others. He cast a spell at a water weed and it grew to a ten meter column. He cast again, and a platform was on top. Once more, and he transfigured a stick into a ladder to the top.

"Come on!"

"What are you doing?" Luna called, climbing behind him.

He reached the top, and transfigured the platform to have a railing on two sides. Getting up, he yelled to Liz, "We need a rope. A long one. Can you conjure us one?"

"Sure," she said, reaching the top, followed by Neville who was bringing up the rear.

She quickly created a coil of rope. Harry had Luna tie one end to the railing. He took the other and waved his wand, transfiguring the end into a very large stone. Checking to see that Luna was done, he banished the stone towards the other side of the moat. Liz conjured some rings around the rope, grabbed one, and slid down the rope. The rock started sliding towards the water with her weight on it, but she made it across. She magicked the rock away from the water, enlarged it, and signaled the others. Luna, Neville, and finally Harry slid across.

Elsewhere, Cedric and his group were holding off Fleur's team while trying to drive away the giant squid that was keeping people off the bridge. On the other side of the field Victor's people were casting spells at the troll that climbed up from under the bridge as they got on it. The direct spells weren't having much luck against its thick hide, but they had started banishing rocks against it to drive it back. After Victor's loss of points on the last task, they were being careful to do as little harm as possible to the creatures they encountered. They didn't know they were giving Harry's team the time it needed to get over the moat.

Harry, meanwhile, was picking himself off the ground.

He said, "Quick vote -- stay together? Or send some people off to slow Krum down? Never mind," looking at the bridge, "they're crossing. To the trophy!"

He ran ahead, aiming between two "ruins" but an Acromantula suddenly appeared ahead of them.

"They're not protected or anything!" Neville called, firing several stunners at it. The rest of the group joined in and the thing collapsed. They moved around it still heading downhill, though there seemed to be a tall hedge in front of them. Liz yelled, and Harry spun to see her thrown forward. She hit her head and Harry saw blood a moment before she was portkeyed away. A red spell, probably a stunning spell, almost hit Luna but she dodged. The air was filled with spells as Harry's slightly smaller group tried to get cover and fight the Durmstrang group, which was hiding in the ruins they had just run through. They transfigured some stones into stone walls, and the two sides were at a stalemate. They kept trying to catch the other team, but the spells were too slow -- they couldn't fire until they saw where their opponent was appearing, but by the time the spell reached them, they could be under cover again. They kept exchanging stunners, but the lack of cover around Harry's group (except for what they conjured up) meant that Victor's people couldn't sneak out easily to flank attack. After what seemed a long time, but was probably less than a minute of taking pot shots at each other, Luna came up with a plan.

Harry shouted "Now!" and all three of them came out from behind the walls to cast a spell. They dived behind the walls as their opponents cast their spells in return.

But Harry hadn't cast at the Durmstrang group. They had cast the spell to awaken someone after being stunned and they cast it on the giant spider that they had just defeated. Suddenly the Durmstrang team had something besides Harry to worry about. Seizing the opportunity they created, Harry's group raced towards the hedge.

As they reached it they stopped, because the hedge was moving.

"I don't believe it!" Neville said. "These are African Stranglers! They're really rare. And dangerous -- don't let them bite you, they're poisonous, and if they grab you that's the first thing they'll do."

Harry looked behind -- the Durmstrang team wasn't chasing them, but they needed to get past the hedge.

"This way," he said, leading them mostly north, which put more distance between them and Victor's group.

They soon reached the end of the Stranglers, but that just meant they had reached another problem. A nightmare creature scuttled beyond the hedge. A full grown (at least Harry hoped it didn't grow any larger) Blast-Ended Skrewt faced them. Three meters long with its long sting curled over its back. Light from the sun shone off its thick armor giving it an iridescent sheen. It was almost beautiful, but the thick armor deflected their stunning spells. It let loose with a spray of fire from somewhere around its head and Harry threw up a fire shield. The burning wall absorbed the fire from the Skrewt. It then blasted forward, flying right through the shield, but because it couldn't see Harry beyond it, it went right by him. That just put it right in front of Neville. The Skrewt stabbed at the surprised Hufflepuff who tried to dodge. The stinger, much thinner than a manticores, struck his arm, as Luna tried to hex it. Again, the spell reflected off the carapace, and Neville fell to the ground. The thing moved over him, as Harry tried a cutting curse aimed at the tail -- if it was a manticore that would work.

But it didn't matter. The creature stopped and Harry saw Neville spin away as the portkey activated.

"He hit it with a spell right on its underbelly," Luna said, running up to Harry.

"Alright, it's just us now. Let's go get a trophy for our fallen companions."

"Yes, sir!" Luna said, saluting. They could see their goal ahead of them.

"Harry," Luna said, running after him.

"What?"

"We have two problems."

He could see two other groups heading for the goal, too.

"Only two? Good."

"There's a ward between us and the trophy."

"Oh," he slowed down to let her catch up. "And the other problem?"

"The Skrewt is after us again."

He looked behind her, and it was indeed moving towards them on its multi-jointed legs.

"Just wonderful. A stunner on it's belly only puts it out for a few minutes," he said, as the Skrewt blasted forward with an explosion of fire from its tail end.

"Get working on the ward, and I'll take care of Hagrid's pet."

She nodded and raced ahead. Harry ran towards the chitinous monstrosity and it adjusted its direction to intercept him. He threw up a small wall between him and the Skrewt, and hoped his plan worked. The wall wasn't much of a wall, but it forced the Skrewt to climb over it, which gave Harry a shot at its unprotected underside. After he got his spell off, he ran in the other direction. As he heard the Skrewt blast, he threw himself to the ground. The Skrewt, reaching speeds no Skrewt had ever achieved before, flew over Harry, the table with the trophy on it, a wall that appeared to be the equivalent of the Strangler hedge on other side, and was still going as Harry lost sight of it.

"What did you do?" Luna asked, not even looking away from where she was working on the ward.

"I cast a feather light charm on it. When it let loose with its blast, it hardly weighted anything. Probably blasted itself right out of the stadium."

Harry joined her at the invisible ward. He had no sooner added some power to hers than Luna grabbed him and pulled him through. Harry saw someone on the other running towards the table. Harry sprinted at it, too. A stunner barely missed the other contestant, and Harry

hoped that no one was targeting him, because he was running all out to make up for the fact that he was getting a slightly later start than the other person. The tall, ginger haired person stumbled, but kept moving, and Harry recognized him as Cedric. Cedric regained his balance, and caught Harry's eyes. He smiled, and put on a burst of speed. Harry tried to increase his speed, and as he got to the table, he leaped at the trophy and grabbed it as Cedric did the same.

He felt a pull behind his navel and saw the shocked look in Cedric's face as they both were pulled away by an active portkey. For a brief moment, Harry thought they were being taken to the judges. But when the twisting stopped, there was no one around.

Chapter 20

Finale

Harry and Cedric looked around. They were in a graveyard. Headstones stretched around them, with woods beyond. Off in one direction there was a road, and an uncultivated field beyond it.

"Do you think this is part of the task?" Cedric asked.

"No," Harry said, bringing his wand up. Suddenly, his forehead exploded with pain. He cried out and fell to his knees. Cedric dropped the cup, and knelt beside Harry.

"We only need one. Kill the big one," a voice hissed, and Harry looked up to see a short man raise a wand.

"Avada Kedavra," he said, pointing at Cedric. Harry pushed the Hufflepuff away from him and the spell's path. Cedric fell onto the cup, and both disappeared.

"Stupify!" the unknown man said.

Harry hadn't been properly balanced to push Cedric so hard, and he fell over, too. Thus, he was lying on the ground when the stunner came at him. He tried to roll out of the way, but the range was too close; the spell hit him, and everything went black.

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When Harry and Cedric disappeared, Luna gasped. She pointed her wand up and shot off a set of red sparks. She then cast a Sonorus charm on herself, and yelled, "Harry's in trouble."

Selene took a look around at her family and friends as she stood up. "Let's go help him then."

"We're with you, too," Sibyll said, getting up and pulling Bill Henderson up with her. Selene headed down the steps towards the field, walking right through the judges section. There were stairs

leading down to the field from the judge's section, and she ignored the questions from the judges as she quickly led her posse to the expanded Quidditch field. Aurors came running over, expecting a crowd control situation. They encountered a determined mother.

"Out of my way. My son has just been kidnapped!"

They might have tried to stop her anyway, except that Dumbledore had followed the Lovegoods down the steps. Mr. and Mrs. Diggory came running down the judge's steps after them, followed by Amelia Bones.

"Let them pass," Dumbledore said.

They hurried down the hill towards the goal. Being on the "side" they were near the eastern bridge. The troll was still lying unconscious next to the bridge, so they crossed without interference. The group had expanded again to include the rest of the judges and Minister Fudge, who came with an assistant and a pair of Aurors.

Frank and Alice had left just minutes ago to check on Neville, but when they heard Luna's amplified voice, and Madam Pomfrey insistence that he would be fine, they left him in the healers care and caught up with the group crossing the field.

They came to the hedge of African Stranglers, and Frank created a ramp over them. Alice waved her wand and invoked a cold mist around the impromptu bridge which caused the vines to still.

"They sleep when it gets too cold," she explained, as they marched over the barrier.

They were hurrying down the hill when Dumbledore finally recognized one of the women he was following.

"Sibyll?"

Henderson turned on him suddenly, wand held at Dumbledore's throat.

"Leave her alone," he said, in a low, menacing voice.

The Headmaster nodded as Mr. Diggory yelled, "Cedric!" Dumbledore looked ahead, and saw that the Diggory boy was lying on the ground.

The group reached the location of the ward, and Dumbledore said, "It will take me a few minutes to dispel this."

But Luna had been busy while waiting for help. She had her wand out and was waving it at the barrier already, causing colorful, magical light to spread out across the entire ward. After a few seconds she said, "It wasn't a very good ward. I changed it so that friends and family can get past."

Most of the group passed through the magical barrier without a problem. Dumbledore looked at them, shocked. Amos Diggory ran ahead to his son. Dumbledore, Karkaroff, and the three from the Ministry found that they still couldn't get through the barrier.

Cedric spoke very quickly as soon as he saw his parents, "Mum, Dad! We have to go back and help Harry! I think they're going to kill him!"

Selene asked in a voice that sounded more threatening for being so calm, "Who is going to kill him and where is he?"

"Uh, I don't know. There was a man, and he cast the Killing Curse at me, but Harry knocked me out of the way. I must have fallen on the portkey," he pointed at the cup.

"What the blazes is going on?" Minister Fudge asked, joining the group. Dumbledore had succeeded in removing his ward from around the trophy area.

Selene turned on him and said, "You were warned that Voldemort was plotting to kidnap one of the contestants! Well now he's succeeded!"

"We were warned, Fudge," Amelia concurred.

"That's impossible! You-Know-Who is dead!" Fudge protested.

"I don't have time to argue with this fool! Everyone, on the count of three, touch the cup. Have your wands ready, we don't know what we'll encounter! Not you," she said, looking at Luna. "You wait here."

"But Muuuuum!"

"Don't 'But Mum' me, young lady. You wait here! Ready?"

"Cedric?"

"I'm going too, Dad. Harry just saved my life!"

Selene looked at everyone. The Headmaster had maneuvered so his hand was over the cup, too. "All right, everybody, on the count of three. One. Two. Three." Nine hands touched the cup almost at the same time.

Nothing happened.

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Harry woke tied to a tombstone. A five foot high cauldron sat on a fire nearby. The small wizard was facing him with a drawn wand. Harry knew he had just been the recipient of an Ennervate spell. He had the unnatural surge of energy he always felt when that spell was cast on him, which had happened many times the previous summer while training with Mad Eye Moody. He looked at the enormous cauldron and thought it reminded him of cartoons he'd seen of cannibals cooking someone. He suddenly had a very bad feeling as he realized that his head was pounding.

"Ah, Wormtail! Our guest of honor has awakened," a voice said. Harry looked up and saw the short wizard with something in his arms. His forehead was consumed in pain again when he looked at the creature.

"Voldemort!" he whispered.

"Well, well, well," the voice from the bundle said, "it seems that my plans have succeeded beyond even my imagination. When Crouch was caught I gave up on capturing the Longbottom boy, but thought the death of one of the champions would start spreading fear throughout the wizarding community, especially when it was accompanied by my mark. But we caught not some random young wizard, but the very so-called Boy-Who-Lived, Wormtail!"

As the wizard answered, Harry tried to think around his headache. He remembered Sirius' and Remus' stories about his father and the Marauders, four friends who had been the bane of teachers and Slytherins when they had been in school. Wormtail was Pettigrew, the escaped rat.

Harry was distracted for a moment as a large green snake slithered around the gravestone he was tied to. It moved out of his sight, and his attention was brought back to the thing Pettigrew was holding.

"How could that be, Master?" Pettigrew questioned.

"You tell me, Wormtail. You were the one who told me Harry Potter wasn't at Hogwarts. But clearly, he isn't the champion from one of the other schools. I'll punish you later.

"Now, Harry Potter, you will be part of the ritual that will return me to my body!"

Harry saw Voldemort clearly now. He was the size of a baby, but dark and blotchy. He didn't seem to have the right number of fingers, and his face was. . . well it wasn't very human.

"Begin!" he commanded. Pettigrew started chanting about father's bones, and cast a spell on the grave to which Harry was tied tight. A bone rose from the ground and Pettigrew floated it into the cauldron. There was a little splash, and Harry realized that it was almost completely full of liquid. He wished he had the opportunity to spoil it, but as he wiggled in the ropes he found there was very little give.

Pettigrew had put down the grotesque creature and approached Harry with a knife in one hand and a wand in the other. Two quick flicks, and Harry's right arm was free, but he couldn't move otherwise. Chanting about "blood of the enemy" Pettigrew cut Harry's arm, and blood ran down his arm into a goblet. The rat faced man poured the cup of blood into the cauldron while Harry, once again able to move, pushed his arm against his side to try to slow the bleeding.

As Pettigrew was busy with the giant pot, Harry had an idea. He was sitting with his legs folded beneath him, as if he was just dumped here. He wiggled and brought his foot closer to his hand. He looked up as Pettigrew dropped something else into the cauldron. Harry stared as he saw that Pettigrew had cut his own hand off. The rat faced wizard cradled it with the other arm, until he picked up the creature and lifted it into the pot.

- - -

"It was enchanted to take someone there and back again; just a single round trip. It is no longer a portkey, and we can't determine where Harry is," Selene said, as she finished analyzing the trophy. Meanwhile Frank and Alice were interviewing Cedric. They finished up and rejoined Selene's group.

"A rural area, same time zone, probably in Britain somewhere. Nothing distinctive, and no one around except the wizard that attacked him."

"I'm afraid that all we can do is hope he can escape," Dumbledore said, soothingly.

"Harry's that way," Luna said, pointing mostly south.

"Their bond!" Selene exclaimed. "Luna, can you triangulate his location?"

"Yes, but I'll need a map and a compass."

"Minerva," Dumbledore said, "Could you run back to the castle and get a map and compass?"

"That will take too long," Luna commented to no one in particular.
"Peppy?"

There was a pop and a house elf appeared. "Whats can Peppy do for you, miss?"

"Peppy, in my desk on the third shelf there's a map of the British Isles. Can you bring it here please? And can you bring me a compass?"

"Peppy don't know where a compass is, miss."

"It's in my office in the cabinet with the tree engraved on the door," Dumbledore told the elf.

"Peppy will be back soon," and the elf popped away.

"Peppy is the elf in charge of Ravenclaw tower," Luna explained. It was less than a minute later when the elf came back with the map and compass.

She opened the map and put it on the ground. While she aligned it with the compass, Dumbledore noticed that there were a number of lines already drawn across the picture of Great Britain. Some seemed to go from Hogwarts to Dover and London. Others also intersected at Dover and London and other places. Luna slowly walked around the map.

While she did, Selene explained how they were going to Apparate to London and get a second direction, and where the lines crossed, they would go there, and use Luna's bond to close in.

"I demand to know what is going on here!" Minister Fudge yelled.

"Voldemort has kidnapped Harry," Luna answered, dreamily.

"Impossible! Voldemort is dead!"

Dumbledore answered, "No, Minister, Voldemort has been active for years. . . ."

"There is no proof!"

"If you had listened, you would have heard the truth. . . ."

"He's in Little Hangleton," Luna pronounced, very firmly.

"You sure?" Selene asked.

"No, but that's where the line aims, and we know he was there before."

"How does this little girl know what she does? Who was there before?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Voldemort," Luna answered calmly, folding up the map.

Fudge and Dumbledore spoke at the same time.

"Voldemort is dead!"

"How do you know he was there before?"

Algie Croaker had joined the group, having been sitting with some former students of his. "To the Forbidden forest," he said. "That's the closest edge of the anti-Apparition wards."

At that point Karkaroff sucked in a breath as if in pain. A figure in black robes hurried from the stand to intercept the group now heading out of the Quidditch pitch.

"Headmaster!" Snape called as he got closer. Dumbledore stopped and waited for the potions master and they had a quick conversation. They then hurried to the group.

Dumbledore gave them the latest news, "Voldemort is resurrected. There's nothing more we can do. It would be folly to attack now. He's called his Death Eaters to himself."

- - -

Harry knew that he couldn't count on the thing drowning. He couldn't reach his boot! He was starting to panic! He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. He fell into his animagus meditation without thinking about it. When he realized what he was doing he continued, as it was succeeding in calming him. Calmer, his muscles relaxed, and there was some play in the ropes. He looked at his boot and reached the knife. Technically it was against the rules for the third task, but Luna had suggested he take it with that voice that had never been wrong. He started cutting the ropes. They fell away as Sirius' present made short work of them.

He slid behind the tombstone, still trying to stay calm. He needed to get away as fast as he could -- he had no wand and no way to defend himself. The phrase "run like the wind" floated across his meditating mind.

Then it happened.

He wondered if it was the lack of blood or the fact that he had other things to worry about, but he broke through the mental barriers he hadn't been able to get past. Suddenly he was totally in his animagus form.

He encountered one of the dangers of learning to be an animagus. He wasn't prepared for the animal mind to overwhelm him. His right foreleg hurt as did his head. He looked around and saw one of the causes of his fear and pain. He did what came naturally.

Pettigrew was consumed by his own pain. He knelt before the cauldron until he heard the sound behind him. He looked and was too shocked to move as a huge beast slammed into him. He was impaled on Harry's horn, and the rhinoceros shook his head to throw off the wizard's body. The rhino turned towards the cauldron and charged again.

His head was in so much pain from being in the presence of Voldemort that he didn't think it could hurt any more. He was wrong. He hit the cauldron with enough force to knock it over, and that hurt. He felt that right through the other pain. He staggered back, and the

part of his mind that was still Harry thought that it must be very funny to see a rhinoceros stagger. There was a splash and the potion that filled it spilled out to the ground. A human shape rolled out, too. Harry's poor eyesight saw it crawl towards Pettigrew's body and reach for his unmaimed arm. Pettigrew, who wasn't dead yet, let out a moan and his body shook. Harry had no idea what Voldemort was doing, but he knew Pettigrew had a wand (and probably Harry's wand, too), and he had to stop Voldemort from reaching it.

He charged again. This time he was far enough away to get some good speed. His horn went right into Voldemort's chest. The Dark Lord was dragged, stuck on Harry's nose, blocking his vision until Harry ran into a headstone. The rhino backed off and shook his head again to throw off his enemy. He then staggered sideways, trying to remain on his feet, but failed. He fell to ground, blood loss and pain having taken their toll. He passed out.

- - -

The crowd around Luna ignored Dumbledore. They marched into the forbidden forest. Remus, Sirius, and Hestia joined the group once they left the Quidditch pitch.

"Sorry we're late," Sirius said. "Some Aurors wouldn't let us join you on the field." Larry quietly informed them what was going on.

"Minister," Croaker said, "here's your chance to actually do something for the people who elected you. Voldemort has just called his Death Eaters. We're going to fight them to rescue Harry. Are you coming or not?"

"But I'm no fighter. . . ."

"Neither is the fourteen year old we're going to rescue," he snarled.

Luna informed them that they reached the edge of the wards. They gathered around Croaker, who had conjured up a quill and parchment. He wrote some symbols down.

"Here are the Apparition coordinates. Once we are in Little Hangleton, Luna will orient us towards Harry and we'll start closing in."

"But I'll just be in the way!" Fudge protested. No one except two Aurors who were acting as his guards paid him any attention, and those two just gave him disgusted looks. They read the paper, nodded, and passed it on to Snape, who had followed. Madam Maxime and Hagrid also read it. Karkaroff didn't even wait for the paper; he just Disapparated once they had past the Apparition wards around Hogwarts. A voice spoke up.

"This is folly!" Dumbledore said, looking at the paper. "He's probably already been killed."

"No, our bond is still there. He's still alive," Luna answered.

The group individually or, in the case of Hagrid and Luna, in pairs, Apparated away.

They appeared on an empty rural road. Luna recognized the area near the shack. She closed her eyes, and spun around slowly, eventually pointing towards some hills.

"Line of sight to the top of that hill," Croaker ordered. Once again the group Disapparated. From the top of the hill they could see a mansion in distance further along the line that Luna had pointed out. Yet, between them and the mansion was a cemetery. Luna pointed to the valley containing the necropolis and said, "He's down there."

Selene took Luna's hand and arm in hers. Luna noticed a moment too late that she was held too tightly to get away.

Selene said, "Larry, I'll be right back. Go get Harry."

- - -

Lucius Malfoy had considered attending the third task of the Triwizard Tournament, but had decided against it. The Dark Mark had darkened in the fall, but had remained the same since then. His contacts at the ministry had told him what Barty Crouch Jr. had been

up to, so he had expected a summons during each of the previous tasks. He had felt relieved each time nothing had happened. He supported the Pure Blood agenda, but he was too successful, too well placed behind the scenes, to want to return to the warfare that he knew Voldemort would require of him.

He remembered when he joined the Death Eaters. He had scorned his father for not putting himself on the line for the cause. But now here he was, wishing things would remain the way they were. He was comfortable, respected, powerful, rich. One thing you could count on with war was chaos, chaos and death. And while the other side had a lot more deaths, he had to admit that the Death Eaters had their share.

Add to that the inevitable punishment that he'd receive when the diary fiasco came to light, and it was no wonder he felt relieved each time a task finished without a call.

But this time was different. He knew as soon as the Wizard Wireless Network announcer mentioned the two Hogwarts champions disappearing. There were people out on the field almost immediately. The announcer certainly didn't know what was happening. When one of the students re-appeared about a minute later, Malfoy wondered if something had gone wrong. The minutes passed as he paced back and forth in the parlor. Then pain shot from his arm throughout his body. The summons! He was so worked up that even that bad news caused him to relax. He opened the secret door, and started dressing in his Death Eater outfit.

He didn't know how it was done, but the summons always included the Apparition coordinates. The pain cut off fairly quickly. He wondered if he was misremembering the feeling from the times during the first war when he was called. He shrugged. There was nothing for it but to answer. There was no escape. He adjusted the mask, and Disapparated.

He arrived in a graveyard. He recognized the place. The old Riddle house was beyond a nearby hill. They would gather here sometimes before heading out to murder, pillage, and burn. He looked around.

The Master should be nearby. He saw a couple of bodies and headed towards them.

As he got closer, he noticed that both had been torn open. He wondered if this was some new spell of Lord Voldemort's. He turned the clothed body over. It was Peter Pettigrew. He was missing a hand. Malfoy approached the naked body, but heard some more Apparitions and turned to see other Death Eaters appear. They looked around, as if lost. Malfoy was sure the shorter one was Goyle. That would make the taller one Crabbe. Others were showing up, too. Malfoy stood up over the naked body. He didn't recognize it, the skin being blotchy and the figure distorted, as if well cursed, and wondered if it was a Muggle tortured by his returned Master. He got into line with the others. They all kept looking around. Damn these masks and hoods, Malfoy cursed to himself, they block our sight way too much.

Someone, Malfoy was pretty sure it was Nott, called out, "Master? We have come!"

That's when all hell broke out.

- - -

Fudge returned to the Quidditch pitch in a quandary. If You-Know-Who really was back, then all was probably lost. But if he wasn't and Fudge announced he was; then he doubted he could keep his job. But Lord You-Know couldn't be back, the Potter boy had finished him off all those years ago. He reached the Quidditch pitch and heard one of the Professors speaking.

". . . Please remain calm and in your seats while the judges look into it." He saw a dumpy little witch standing on the stone table that had held the Triwizard Cup. There was an even tinier wizard standing on the ground next to her. He made his way towards them in the center of the arena.

"What's going on here?"

The witch, who was Professor Sprout head of Hufflepuff house, turned to him and a look of surprise appeared on her face. "You just came back from the rescue mission. Why are you asking me? Did they save the Lovegood boy?"

Fudge sputtered, "We don't even know if he needs saving!"

"Oh posh!" She replied. "You know that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named planned to kidnap the Longbottom boy after getting him into the Triwizard tournament by cheating. I know your Aurors took testimony from everyone who was in the room with Crouch, Jr."

"Crouch was insane. We can't take anything he said as truth. Sure, he believed it but that doesn't" Fudge trailed off as he noticed a group of people running down the hill towards him.

"But now we have the confirmation that he was speaking the truth. The portkey and attempted murder of Cedric Diggory prove it."

"All it proves. . . ." but Fudge didn't get to finish that statement. The group that was making its way down the hill arrived. They were reporters.

"So who's in charge of the rescue?"

"Where was the Lovegood boy taken?"

"In retrospect, do you think that the tournament should have been canceled when you first heard about You-Know-Who's involvement."

"Professor Sprout, did you know you still have your Sonorus charm still on?"

"Oh, my! Thank you. Finite!" she replied.

Fudge had been preparing to respond to the questions but stopped short at the last exchange. He went over in his mind the statements that Professor Sprout had said to him, that everyone in the audience had heard. He blanched. Nobody had heard his responses! He stared

dumbly at the reporters as they kept asking him questions that he didn't hear.

- - -

Selene and Luna appeared at the gates of Hogwarts.

"Get the healer down here," she told her daughter. "We'll return with the wounded here, unless we think they need to go right to Saint Mungo's."

"Yes, Mum," Luna answered, "But I don't think it's fair!"

"When you have children of your own, you'll understand. Now I have to go help Harry and your father. Get up that road, young lady!"

Luna got.

Selene Disappeared.

- - -

Amelia looked at the graveyard as the first Death Eater appeared. He seemed to wander aimlessly, and Amelia realized he was looking at a body. More black robed people appeared, and she got the group away from the hill top.

"I need five people who can get anti-Apparition wards up. You two," she pointed at Fudge's two guards, "Frank and Larry, you would know, too. Croaker? Good." She assigned them five targets, and they Disappeared to set the anchors for the wards in a rough pentagonal shape. The rest were to Apparate to the surrounding woods, and wait for her signal, which would probably be a blasting hex aimed at one of the Death Eaters.

"I suggest we use stunners," Dumbledore began, but Amelia interrupted him.

"You are all hereby deputized. Take them out so they don't get up. Use whatever spell you think is appropriate, but no Unforgivables."

The group nodded and Apparated into the woods.

- - -

Larry stood behind a crypt. He carefully waved his wand, chanting quietly as he performed the ritual that would raise the temporary anti-Apparition wards. He could have chanted faster, but the Aurors were taught to do it at a specific speed, so they would all reach the end at about the same time. He reached the end of the chant, raised his wand, and channeled his power into the magical field. For a moment he almost panicked, but then he felt at least one other person's power join his. Then all five were combined. He pointed his wand at the ground and traced the anchor rune that would strengthen the ward for a little while. Once that was drawn in the dirt, he ran towards the sound of spellfire.

- - -

Amelia counted over twenty five figures in a line. She was disillusioned and had cast muffling charms on her feet, and approached the group of Death Eaters as quickly as she could. She didn't see their master nor Harry. Without Luna, they wouldn't know when this was no longer a rescue. But she would see as many of Voldemort's people captured or killed today. She would do it for the people she served, for her nephew and his wife, Susan's parents, killed in the first war, and for Harry. She held her wand steady, waiting.

She felt the anti-Apparition wards go up, and cast the first spell. The Death Eaters scattered as spells rained down on them from every side.

- - -

Dumbledore stood in the woods near the gathering of Death Eaters, searching for their master, knowing it would be him that would have to engage Voldemort and hope that the rest would be able to get away. He felt the wards come into being and saw a Death Eater explode as Madam Bones' first spell hit him in the chest. Dumbledore

made his way towards the fighting, watching for the Dark Lord who would probably kill him today.

- - -

Professor McGonagall followed about twenty feet back from Dumbledore. She couldn't say that he had impressed her with his "advice" today. Expecting a fourteen year old boy to escape from Death Eaters? Dumbledore stunned a Death Eater, and walked on in a distracted way, Minerva thought. She re-stunned the Death Eater and the one that Ennervated the first. She went to the Death Eaters, removed their wands, transfigured some shackles, and raced to regain her position behind Dumbledore.

- - -

Selene appeared on the hill overlooking the cemetery, and saw the battle raging. She cast the spell that would allow her to see magic, and noted where the ward ended. She Apparated to the edge of the ward and ran into the graveyard. A black figure appeared before her, and she let loose a bolt of lightning. The spell was terrible at anything but close range -- it would ground itself before hitting the target. But at close range. . . well, she ran past the smoking body, heading for the center of the graves, looking for Harry.

- - -

Hestia and Sirius stayed together as they moved among the graves. They moved in a sort of dance, however it was one where they didn't look at each other but rather watched for attacks from behind as they both made their way towards the center of action. Which they found, or rather, it found them.

A group of Death Eaters, doing their own protective dance, came upon Sirius and Hestia, and the engaged couple had to hide behind a gravestone while spells started blowing their protection away.

- - -

Remus and Sirius had agreed to get between the cemetery and the large house on the hill, so that was the area to which they Apparated. Sirius side-alonged Hestia so they arrived at the same place. Remus was just in the area and maneuvered behind the couple, adding protection to their combined backs. He saw them forced to take cover behind a monument. Moving around the Death Eaters, he eventually flanked them. He started attacking, to get the attention of the Death Eaters. He dived for cover as his plan worked.

It was five to three, but the three were in two different locations. Remus cast a spell that sent a jet of water high into the air, and directed it to fall on the Death Eaters. He was able to do that while keeping completely covered. It not only distracted the Death Eaters, but it made them concentrate on Remus. Hestia and Sirius took advantage of their enemies change of focus to attack. Hestia stunned one, while Sirius hit the area with a freezing hex. The Death Eaters not only lost the ability to do rapid wand movements as their wet robes froze solid, they slipped on the icy ground. Remus, Sirius, and Hestia raced in and captured all five alive.

- - -

Snape made his way to the gathering place of the Death Eaters. Amelia's attack had scattered them, and there was no one in sight at the moment -- which meant if he was going to be attacked it would be from someone he didn't see. He kept turning his head, trying to see every direction at once.

He reached the giant cauldron, and gingerly touched the wet ground, sniffing at his finger. Whatever this potion was, he didn't recognize it. He went over to the bodies. The first he recognized -- Peter Pettigrew, the traitor. He had come to a bad, and it looked painful end -- missing a hand and his chest ripped open. Snape saw the naked body and thought it might be a sacrifice for whatever ritual occurred here. He was about to turn it over when a loud snort made him jump.

The sound had come from a large, gray creature. He walked over to it, trying to recognize it. The sharp horn was very plain, so it couldn't be an erumpet. One of it's forelegs had been cut and it was still bleeding. If he didn't know what this was, it was probably some very rare

animal. It might be worth something, if harvested right. Better safe than sorry, he thought as he cast a quick and dirty healing charm to stanch the flow of blood.

He was sure his knowledge of the Dark Arts didn't including anything that required such a creature, live, to be part of the ritual. The thing wasn't getting up, even with a healed leg, so he went back to the sacrificial victim. He turned the bald man over, and gasped.

- - -

It was strange, Harry thought. The sudden disappearance of the pain in his arm caused him to wake up. He opened his eyes, and realized he was still a rhino. However, the animal part of him was exhausted and didn't put up any resistance when Harry started doing the animagus meditation to try to turn back to a human. He succeeded, and started crawling over to Pettigrew in the hopes of finding his wand. He reached the traitor's body, and found it in his pocket. Then he collapsed again, but this time as a human clutching his wand.

- - -

Snape stood up and pulled back the sleeve of his robe. He touched his throat as he cast the Sonorus charm.

"Death Eaters! Put down your weapons! The Dark Lord Voldemort is dead! Check your Dark Marks. He is really and truly gone. Surrender, and lets put this behind us."

The occasional sound of spells continued from the surrounding area.

"Give it up. You're outnumbered and no reinforcements are coming. The Dark Lord is dead; there is no reason to lose your lives, too."

Snape stiffened and fell forward. A figure came out of the woods behind him. The large Death Eater used the toe of his boot to flip Snape over on his back. Snape's eyes, the only he could move while held by Petrificus Totalus hex, widened as the Death Eater looked down at him.

"There's loyalty, something that you wouldn't know about, traitor!" He waved his wand, while incanting, "Avada Kada. . . ."

Snape saw a beam of fire fly right through the Death Eater's chest, killing him instantly. With the casters' death, the petrification spell dissipated, and Snape saw the missing Lovegood boy collapsing to the ground. He ran over to the boy. The boy's eyes opened, and Snape found himself looking into two emerald green irises. His short hair was darker than usual. Snape gasped in horror as he realized that he once again had a life debt to a Potter.

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Author Note: This chapter and the previous (sorry, I forgot to note it there) was beta-ed by Swordchucks, Evan Mayerle, and Wombat. Thanks guys!

Also in the non-existent notes on the previous chapter, is a pointer to Charles Williams' book, Many Dimensions, where I stole the idea of the magic stone.

Chapter 21

Aftermath

Selene ran into the cemetery proper, quickly moving over to Snape.

"Harry! Is he all right?"

Snape answered, without any trace of emotion, "He has lost a lot of blood, but beyond that I cannot say. He should get to the healers right away."

She cast a featherlight charm on him and picked him up. She then cast a Sonorus on her own neck, and yelled, "Larry! Harry's alive, but I'm taking him to St. Mungo's. See you there! Finite" She started running.

"Be careful!" Snape yelled after her, "There's a large, gray, wounded animal around here that they used in the ritual!" The warning didn't slow Selene down. Sibyll and Bill Henderson came running into view from another direction. Snape pointed after the retreating mother, and told them, "Protect her!"

As Sibyll ran, she reflected that Severus didn't have his usual sneer. They didn't do much protecting, seeing no one to protect Selene from as she ran towards the edge of the wards. Once beyond them, she Apparated away. Bill told Sibyll to follow her while he stayed and offered his assistance to the local authorities.

Sibyll arrived at St. Mungo's and saw Selene checking Harry into the hospital. She made her way to her sister-in-law.

"Oh, Sibyll!" Selene said, as she noticed the other woman. "Please go back to the Hogwarts gates and bring Luna here. She'll be beside herself with worry!"

Sibyll reassured Selene, as Harry was put on a gurney and rolled away quickly, followed by Selene. Sibyll made her way to the Apparition point and returned to Hogwarts.

- - -

Moments after Sibyll and Luna Disapparated from the gates of Hogwarts, several more figures showed up. One man had another thrown over his shoulder.

"Medic! This man's been bitten by a large green snake."

With the help of the brown haired woman who appeared with them, he got the wizard off his shoulder.

The healers conjured a bed for the patient, and went to work on the pale, clammy wizard.

"This would be easier if we knew what kind of snake it was that bit him," Pomfrey said.

Sirius pulled a glass jar from the pocket of his robe, conjured another bed, and dropped what looked like a worm from the jar onto the bed. A wave of his wand caused it to return to its original ten foot length.

As Pomfrey started casting detection spells on the snake, Sirius took the victim's hand and whispered, "Hang on Remus! We haven't taught Harry all our tricks yet."

- - -

Dumbledore found that Amelia had summoned more Aurors before he made it to Voldemort's body. They were bringing in Death Eaters' bodies, and searching for more. Amelia had estimated about twenty-five but hadn't actually counted. Only a few were still alive.

Someone had conjured a set of boxers for Voldemort. Someone else had covered the boxers with playing kitty cats.

"What happened?" he asked.

"We don't know," Amelia said. "Snape said that he saw some large animal with a horn nearby when he arrived. According to him, it had a cut on its leg, like its blood had been used in the resurrection ritual."

Our guess is that it woke when it wasn't supposed to and gored Pettigrew and Voldemort. It's on the loose, but I don't have the manpower to hunt it right now."

"And the Lovegood boy?"

"He too had been bled for the ritual," Snape said, coming over to them. "He recovered enough to save me from McNair and has been taken to St. Mungo's. He might be able to give us more information on the ritual, but then again, he could have been bled to unconsciousness before it got started."

"Yes, we will have to talk to the boy. It's vital that we learn everything we can, to make sure that Voldemort can't return this way again."

Bones and Snape looked at him in surprise. "You think he's going to return from the dead, again?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, I do. He did it once. I see no reason why he won't do it again."

"Headmaster," Snape exposed his arm, "the Dark Mark is completely gone this time. Voldemort is gone for good!"

"No, we just think he's gone. He'll be back. He has to."

Bones' eyes widened at that remark and her monocle fell out of her eye. She coldly asked, "Please explain that remark, Headmaster?"

"I'm sorry, Director, but there are some things I cannot tell you."

"And there are some things I have to know. We'll continue this discussion later."

At that time, an Auror came out of the woods levitating a body. It was not dressed in black.

"Director. . . ." he started to say, but was interrupted by Bones.

"Richards? He's. . . ?"

"Yes, looks like the killing curse."

"He had a family. . . ." she said.

- - -

Madam Maxime cast a charm to reinforce the table in the middle of the Quidditch pitch. Casting the announcer's spell on her neck, she climbed on the top of the table and informed the crowd (and the reporters) that the fourth champion had been rescued and that Voldemort had been resurrected but was now truly dead.

Hermione, sitting in the stands with Draco, said, "He's not only really dead, he's really most sincerely dead."

Draco looked at her with an expression that said he was questioning her sanity.

"It's a Muggle song about the death of an evil witch," she explained.

"I don't think I'll ever understand Muggles," he muttered, and joined in the cheering for the demise of the Dark Lord.

Meanwhile the press was questioning the Beauxbatons' Headmistress about the rescue. It was the magic in the spell that caused her answers to be heard despite the cheering. Like a seasoned politician, she incorporated the questions into the answers so everyone could know what she was answering.

"We think a sacrificial animal used in the ritual to resurrect him ended up killing Voldemort."

"He cast a spell on his name, but with his true death, it's gone. Now anyone can say Voldemort and no one fears it."

"We can only guess why he kidnapped a champion. We think it was both because he needed a human sacrifice, and he wanted to spread fear and terror when the body was returned."

"There was plenty for us to do once we arrived at the ritual site. There were over two dozen Death Eaters who did not know that Voldemort was dead, but wanted us to share that fate. The Aurors are there, now, and have taken the survivors into custody."

"We will worry about scoring the contest after Dumbledore has returned. Karkaroff disappeared before the rescue."

"At least one other rescuer was hurt. He was taken to the gates of Hogwarts where healers were waiting. No, I don't know his or the Lovegood boy's status. No more questions. Go celebrate!"

She gave a little hop off the table and was caught by Hagrid as she landed.

The reporters intercepted the party entering Hogwarts from the gates. Sirius and Hestia stopped them from pestering the healers and trying to question the drugged up Remus.

- - -

"Good afternoon, Harry," Luna said, as he woke up.

"Uggg, I think I ate a bug. Or a whole bunch of bugs. That died last year."

"Must be that blood replenishing potion that they gave you; you know Mum always says that the taste is in inverse proportion to the usefulness of the potion. Here, have some water."

Harry drank. "Your mum always did like big words. How did I get here? Where is here?"

"St. Mungo's. The family rescued you."

"Everyone fine?"

"I think so. Mum's outside keeping the Aurors and reporters away." She brushed his forehead with her hand. "Harry, the last line is gone. He's gone. You're free."

Harry took her hand and kissed it with a tired smile. "Good. Let's get married."

"We're already married."

"Then everything important is done. Good night, wife." He closed his eyes.

She kissed him on the cheek and continued to hold his hand. "Good night, husband," she whispered. He was soon asleep, as the healers had told Luna he would be.

- - -

"Let me through! Let me through! I have to get in there!" With his authority and forceful personality, Dumbledore had reached the corridor outside Harry's room in St. Mungo's. However, even the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and most powerful wizard of the age were no match for an angry mother.

"Please let me in to talk to Harry," he told Selene.

"No."

"Yes."

"No. If we had followed your suggestion to let him escape on his own, he would be dead! You had no desire to go to him when he needed help, now leave him alone when he's healing."

"Is that true?" one of the reporters asked. "You counseled against the rescue?"

"If Voldemort had been alive, he would have killed every one of the rescue party. We could not have stood up to him," Dumbledore explained.

"So how did the boy kill Voldemort?"

"Evidence shows he didn't," the Auror standing next to Selene spoke up. He was a large, bald, black man, and he gave the impression that there was no force, mundane or magical, that would move him from his position. "We examined the spells cast through Lovegood's wand, and the only spell that was cast after he was taken from the Triwizard Tournament was a flame spear, and I've been informed he cast that to save his potions professor, well after the rescue group arrived."

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The final count was twenty four dead black robed figures, three alive, Remus and Harry injured, and Robert Richards, one of Fudge's Aurors, killed. Director Bones finished with the crime scene and returned to her office. She already had a dozen reports from different Aurors about the events of the day on her desk. There was also a copy of the special edition of the Daily Prophet with big bold headlines proclaiming,

Voldemort Dead Again

Defeated by 14 year old this time

Fudge refuses to join rescue team

She smiled at the last headline. Maybe they would finally get rid of that bumbler. Her department, which included the enforcement of the Secrecy statute, was the reason the Ministry existed. But that hadn't stopped Fudge from reducing the budget nearly every year he had been in office.

Maybe she should. . . ? Never mind. Who would vote for her?

She looked through the papers. No one had interviewed the kidnap victim. She looked at the other pile of papers she had on her desk from before going to Hogwarts. Yes, she thought. This interview was one she would take care of herself.

She headed to St. Mungo's.

- - -

Severus Snape followed a group of mostly upper level Slytherins as they climbed the stairs from the dungeons. He had just had a discussion about how the Dark Lord was dead, and as Slytherins, no matter what their feelings about the Dark Lord, they had to present a joyful face. The forces of Light had won, and supporters of the Dark would have to hide what they really felt until things changed again. Things always changed. A Slytherin works with the world as it is, not as they want it to be.

He also told them that he would be in and out of the castle, but eventually would be in his office, should anyone want to talk to him. He encouraged them to go to the celebration and blend in.

From the entrance hall, his students headed towards the blast of sound that escaped the Great Hall. Snape continued up the stairs to the Ravenclaw tower. There were a few students there from Dark Families, and he encouraged them to join the celebration, too. He made his way to the third year dormitory and with the help of an elf collected what he wanted. He made his way to the headmaster's office, and floo-ed to St. Mungo's.

- - -

Director Bones picked up the Daily Prophet's second special edition in the lobby of St. Mungo's. She recognized someone sitting in the lobby and stopped to talk with him.

"Headmaster. What are you doing here?"

"Ah, Director! I'm hoping to talk with Harry. It's vital that I find out what happened today."

"I think we have most of the story. He was used to provide blood for some sort of resurrection ritual. The mystery beast escaped and killed Pettigrew and Voldemort, and we showed up as the Death Eaters did. Very little remains to be answered. We've still had no luck hunting down the creature."

"I disagree, Director! A great deal needs to be answered. What ritual did they use? What creature did they use? How was it strong enough to kill Voldemort? He is one of the most powerful wizards in the world. A mere animal shouldn't have been able to kill him. And I don't believe he's any more gone now than he was the last time. He'll be back! We have to learn everything we can so that next time it will be the last time!"

"Calm down, Headmaster," Bones said, removing his hands from her shoulders. "There's no reason to be upset. According to Professor Snape the last time the Dark Mark did not fade completely. This time it did. He's convinced that Voldemort is gone for good. We can even say his name. Why can't you accept it?"

"For reasons I cannot disclose to even you, Director Bones, I know that Voldemort is coming back."

"Well, I have to go talk to Larry and Selene, and if I can, Harry. But we'll continue this discussion later. And you better consider sharing some of this information with me, or you might find yourself in legal trouble."

"There are things more important than laws, Director. The greater good has to be served, even by you."

"Right. Philosophical discussions another time. Go celebrate!"

- - -

Snape saw the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in a heated discussion with Dumbledore. It was time to re-evaluate his relationship with the Headmaster, he thought as he went to the information desk. Soon he was making his way through the small crowd of reporters who were still hanging around Harry's room. He approached the Auror by the door.

"I am Mr. Lovegood's potions instructor. I would like to speak with his parents if I could. I also brought some clothes and other things for him," he said, lifting the bag.

"Thanks. Wait here, and I'll get one of them." Shacklebolt poked his head in the room, and was out in a moment. Larry appeared, and took the bag from Snape.

"Thanks, Professor!" he said.

"If I may come in for a moment, Mr. Lovegood, I would like to discuss something with you and your wife, and my student if he is awake."

"Very well, come in, but Harry's asleep."

"Thank you." They entered the hospital room.

Once the door was closed, he saw that Harry was sleeping with his . . . girlfriend? Cousin? Wife? . . . next to him. Her mother came over toward him. He noticed she had the same silvery eyes that her daughter had.

"He brought some clothes for Harry," Larry told his wife.

"That you, Professor. And thank you for coming on the rescue."

"You are welcome, madam. I also put in his hair and eye coloring compounds in that bag. I think you should fix him up before he leaves here."

Larry looked shocked, but Selene seemed to take it in stride.

"Thank you, again. Have you told anyone?" she asked.

"No. I felt it was not my secret to tell."

"When did you find out?"

"When I found him in the cemetery and his disguise was gone. Until then, I had no idea. It was an excellent disguise."

"Thank you."

Snape glanced over at the sleeping child. "Please give him my thanks. At the last moment, he saved me from being killed. I am in his debt."

"I will," she said, as she removed the Eye Dye from the bag. "And we are in yours, as I didn't even notice his eyes."

"The Dark Lord must have done that before the ceremony."

"I guess. Harry hasn't woken up long enough to get his story. The healers say that that's normal after losing so much blood."

Snape just nodded. "May I ask how the Boy-Who-Lived came to be bonded with your daughter. This is for my own information, and it will not be revealed to obsessed headmasters."

Selene answered, "A seven year old little girl invited him home, and shortly thereafter bonded with her new friend. After that we had to make sure he was properly cared for. And we never used his title. He was just a little boy who needed help."

"You did well raising him. He could easily have been an arrogant bully like his father. I congratulate you, madam."

"Thank you, Professor."

They made a little more small talk, and he left. Amelia Bones was outside the room, talking with the bald Auror.

"Is he awake?" she asked.

"No."

"I'll wait."

She opened the paper and saw that it was mostly the same. The comment about Lovegood killing Voldemort was gone. But there was a new headline.

Dumbledore advised parents to abandon Harry

The next few days were busy ones for Amelia Bones. The Obliviators were kept very busy cleaning up after celebrations got too magically demonstrative. Harry, after explaining what happened to his guardians, gave a statement to Amelia that said that he was tied to the tombstone and passed out after Pettigrew bled him. He didn't see the gray creature that Snape had, but later, after waking up, he was behind the tombstone, and no longer tied up. He crawled to Pettigrew's body, retrieved his wand, and saved Snape. He had learned the fire spear spell on his own, and his head of house knew that he knew it.

Thus, the mystery of what really happened to Voldemort was speculated, theorized, and editorialized continuously for over a week.

- - -

Harry felt really bad when he heard about Auror Richards' death. It took a lot of tender loving care, but Selene convinced him that he had nothing to feel guilty about. He could feel sad for his death, he could rail at the injustice of it, he could hate Voldemort or his Death Eaters for causing it, but he had no reason to feel guilty. Given other outlets for his feelings, he did overcome his guilt. He wanted to, and was given permission to go to the funeral. Larry, Selene, Sibyll, and her American Auror boyfriend joined him.

Amelia took time off from her busy schedule to attend, too, but Fudge did not. He had been told that the family did not want him there, and he wisely took their suggestion. Unfriendly bereaved family always made for bad press. Unfortunately, not showing up did, too.

The reporters did try to interview Harry. Larry had anticipated this, and had helped Harry prepare a statement in case he was waylaid by reporters there.

"I am not going to answer any questions now. This is a funeral for a brave man who helped rescue me. You should be talking to the friends and family of a real hero, not a victim. Thank you."

- - -

Despite the euphoria over the defeat of the Dark Lord, some people were not having good days.

Karkaroff re-appeared after the announcement of Voldemort's death, but the damage to his career was done. He was removed from his position as headmaster of Durmstrang only two days later.

Fudge's career almost survived. He was almost rescued when some reporters witnessed the former Divination Professor from Hogwarts running through St. Mungo's while being chased by Dumbledore, who was yelling that he only wanted to talk to her.

That got the rumors mills working overtime, and took Fudge off the front page, but it couldn't remove all the criticism of Fudge from the papers, and the funeral was the last straw. Rufus Scrimgeour, head of the Aurors, was appointed interim minister until elections could be organized. He allowed Fudge's last act, an investigation into Dumbledore's actions during the Triwizard Tournament and afterwards, to continue. Everyone agreed that Dumbledore tried to discourage the rescue. His insistence that it was for their own safety didn't pacify the wizarding public. And when the story of him chasing Sibyll Lovegood (formerly Trelawney) through St. Mungo's came out, Dumbledore was forced to resign from his positions of authority by the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

Dumbledore also hadn't been forthcoming when he had his private meeting with Madam Bones. He still insisted that Voldemort would come back, but wouldn't give any reasons. She couldn't force him to talk, but told him not to leave the country, as he seemed to have information important to the security of wizarding Britain.

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The Triwizard cup was awarded three days after the contest. It took that long to get the judges back together and focused on the event. While Harry's group was awarded points for innovation in crossing the moat, Cedric's group had to both overcome the Beauxbatons team and the squid, as well as a few other obstacles before reaching the cup. In terms of leadership and difficulty, his activities were deemed to be worth more, and as they both reached the cup at the

same time, he was awarded more points. Even though he was no longer headmaster, Karkaroff still remained a judge, and successfully argued that anything that happened after they touched the cup couldn't be counted in the score. So in the end, Cedric beat Harry by a point. Harry, at home recovering, sent a note of congratulations to the other three champions, but especially Cedric. He also sent "Thank you"s to Neville, Elizabeth, and the rest of the Ravensclaws who helped him train. He sent a letter every day to Luna.

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Harry spent a week at home, during which time Dumbledore was removed from the school. Being home from school wasn't as much fun as it could have been. He had to spend most of it in bed and Luna wasn't released from classes, so she wasn't there. When he did return he got a huge party in the Ravenclaw common room in honor of coming in second in the Triwizard Tournament.

The Beauxbaton and Durmstrang students returned to their own schools, and there were comments about having another tournament (in the words of Madam Maxime) "In another hundred years or so. We'll see."

One thing Harry missed was the temporary withdrawal of fifteen students from Hogwarts so they could attend funerals for their parents. Draco was not among the students -- his father hadn't been captured or killed. Harry and Hermione went out of their way to include any children of Death Eaters in activities they were involved in, mostly the after dinner study hall. He got the older Ravensclaws to do the same with the children in their years.

Things almost quieted down -- any remaining Death Eaters who weren't at the cemetery got off free: no one turned them in, and since they no longer had the Dark Mark, they couldn't be found in a crowd. Malfoy, senior, was happy that Voldemort was gone and he had escaped without detection. He could continue as a puppetmaster behind the throne. He felt lucky.

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Crime was down, accidental violations of the Secrecy Statute were down, school was finishing soon, Scrimgeour looked like a shoe in for the Ministers job . . . when the press broke another story.

A reporter doing follow up work on some of the people involved in the rescue for future stories -- specifically, they were thinking of the anniversary stories that would run the next year -- found out that Sibyll Lovegood was a registered Oracle with two confirmed predictions in the New World. That led to the discovery of her one recorded prophesy in the British Department of Mysteries. The acting minister insisted that Dumbledore take it off the shelf so that government could hear it. Dumbledore tried to quietly refuse, but received an anonymous note saying that if he didn't cooperate a certain vase and explanation would be given to the Aurors. So far that whole episode had been kept from the public eye, and Dumbledore knew he wouldn't be able to avoid Azkaban if it ever came to light.

Scrimgeour tried to make political hay from the event, allowing a reporter to get into the Hall of Prophecies before the official government group went in. He was hidden one aisle over from the prophecy. Dumbledore removed the ball, but before he touched it with his wand he tried to talk Scrimgeour out of his course of action.

"You realize that Voldemort would love to know what's in this ball." He looked around at the officials and continued, "You are jeopardizing the future of the wizarding world by letting this information get out. You are condemning us all by letting so many people hear this."

"Stop being melodramatic, Dumbledore, just get on with it."

"I could let just you hear it, Rufus. There's no need for this to get out. We can still protect our world, and you'll see. . . ."

"Stop stalling, and touch it."

Dumbledore did, and the prophecy was heard by the group and the reporter.

Scrimgeour looked at him with a certain amount of glee. "That's it? That's the prophecy? Dumbledore, I do believe you are losing it. That prophecy was fulfilled thirteen years ago."

Dumbledore interrupted, "Voldemort will be back, and Harry Potter will defeat him."

"Keep saying that, Dumbledore. No matter how much you believe, it won't make it true."

The group broke up and the reporter was called into Scrimgeour's office. The acting minister officially released the text of the prophecy, denigrating Dumbledore at the same time.

The lead story the next day was not what the Acting Minister of Magic expected:

Scrimgeour Would put Wizarding World in Danger For the Sake of His Career

Yesterday, Acting Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour acknowledged by his actions that he would put his political career ahead of the public's safety. In the Hall of Prophecies, he insisted that Albus Dumbledore reveal the contents of a prophecy to a group of government officials. Dumbledore, the one who heard and recorded the prophecy, insisted that the contents would put the wizarding world in danger if it became widespread knowledge. He offered to let Scrimgeour hear it privately, but the Acting Minister rejected Dumbledore's suggestions.

While it turned out that Dumbledore was wrong (see companion piece on the prophecy's contents), Scrimgeour had no way of knowing that before he listened. Is this the kind of man you want as Minister of Magic?

Scrimgeour's approval rating, fairly high before then, plummeted. A quick look over the other candidates, who would all turn on and tear down the front runner, led to the drafting of a new candidate.

By the end of the school year, Amelia Bones was the new Minister of Magic.

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At noon, several hours after the Hogwarts Express had taken the children away, the staff was having their traditional final feast.

Headmistress Minerva McGonagall thanked the staff for their hard work as teachers and the extra work involved in the Triwizard Tournament. She handed out little gifts to all the instructors.

"And finally, to those who are staying, I thank you for your vote of confidence. To the rest of you, I wish you well with your future endeavors. Please keep us posted as to your status, we would love to hear from you. Sir Giles, good luck in Ethiopia. I look forward to your next book. Rubeus, good luck in France. May all your dreams come true. Hogwarts just won't be the same without you. Severus, good luck with your potions research. I expect great things from you.

"But it is with a little trepidation that I make the next announcement, because it flies in the face of twenty years of tradition. I most happily announce that Alastor will be returning next year as our Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor -- the first person to hold the position for two consecutive years in more than two decades. I hope you set a record for length of time as the instructor, Mad Eye.

"Once again, to all who are leaving, and all who are staying, I thank you for a successful year."

After lunch the new Headmistress and the new Deputy Headmaster were in her office discussing the positions that they had to fill. Taking a break from official business, they relaxed with some tea.

"Poor Albus," Filius Flitwick commented. "That prophecy, and the loss of Harry Potter must have driven him around the bend."

"Unfortunately, I agree. I shudder to think what he might have done had he actually found Harry."

"True. Although I do wonder about the prophecy. . . " Filius mused.

"Oh?"

"I have a feeling we don't really know everything that happened at Voldemort's resurrection."

Minerva gave one of her rare smiles. "It sounds like you've discovered the nom de guerre of our missing student?"

"Yes. Turns out that his disguise is rather susceptible to magical transformation. When he ate one of the Weasley twins' Canary Creams he returned to himself with green eyes and black hair. And you? How did you find out?"

"After considering all the students in his normal year, I looked at the other years. There were very few students who didn't have normal parents. Then, when word of his marriage with his cousin was revealed, I tried to find out how closely they were related and was unable to find out who his parents were. Not conclusive, but strongly suspicious."

Filius nodded. "But I see that you, like I, felt no need to tell anyone else."

"With the strange things that happen around him already? He didn't need the burden of being the "Boy-Who-Lived" on top of it."

"I totally agree," Filius said, as he lifted his tea cup. "To Harry!"

"To Harry!" Minerva responded.

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Harry, Luna, Hermione, and Draco were in a compartment together. They were on the outskirts of London and had spoken to a lot of their friends during the train ride home. But the day was getting on, and everyone was tiring out, so they relaxed, holding hands and talking.

"We'll see you at least for Sirius' wedding," Harry said to Draco.

"I've never been to a wedding," Hermione said.

Draco gave her hand a squeeze and promised, "I'll make sure you get an invitation. It will probably be at his place."

Luna nodded, "I would expect so, and as he's still not good with crowds, I would guess it will be a small wedding."

Harry asked Draco, "Are you going to be living there still?"

"Probably. My Mum said she would be trying to mend some fences with Father, now that the Dark Lord is dead. I'll see if I can get him to agree to let me have a party at Malfoy Mansion. We have our own pitch, you know. I intend to have enough people who play Quidditch there so we can have a game."

"That will be good after a year of no Quidditch," Harry said. Hermione only rolled her eyes.

"Hey," he told her, "it's our cultural heritage. You should try and learn to enjoy it. Or at least learn not to roll your eyes when someone talks about it."

They laughed at that. The train soon reached the station, they said their good-byes, and headed home. But before they left the compartment, Hermione stopped Harry and whispered to him, "I'm not sure what you did, but thank you for defeating Voldemort."

Harry just nodded and smiled.

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Sirius' wedding was relatively small, but it was still about twice as large as his annual Boxing Day party since it had to include Hestia's friends and family. After the ceremony and the formal dinner, Sirius and Remus took Harry away from the proceedings.

"How goes the Animagus meditation, Harry? Still keeping up with that, despite tournaments and kidnappings?"

"Oh, yes. Uncle Ollie says that meditation is useful for concentrating when carving, and for Occlumency, which is helpful to your memory."

"Do you want to try to transform again? I think you were close last Easter break."

"Sure," Harry said with a smile. He sat and relaxed his mind, falling into the meditative state. Since he worked about 20 hours a week at Ollivander's store, Uncle Ollie did recommend meditation frequently. He also recommended studying his runes, and practice carving, but Harry felt he didn't need to bring that up in the current situation. He reached the relaxed state he wanted to be in, and let his inner animal out. He transformed completely into his rhinoceros form.

"Wow! That's great!" Sirius exclaimed.

Remus walked around the huge animal, patting his flank. "That is quite amazing. Can you turn back? Or do you need some help."

The rhino snorted, and a minute later Harry was back. He got up from the floor, brushing the dust from his formal clothes.

"Congratulations, Harry," Remus said. "Are you going to register?"

"I'm going to wait until after N.E.W.T.s. I'm going to present my Animagus form for extra credit on the Transfiguration N.E.W.T. and claim that I learned it during my last two years of school."

Remus looked at Harry, thinking about what he just said. "Snivilus' beast! That was you! You killed Voldemort!"

"What?" Sirius asked.

"Harry turned into his rhino and killed Pettigrew and Voldemort in the cemetery. Snape healed him while he was still in animal form, and you changed back in time to save him!"

Harry nodded, smiling.

Sirius got a puzzled look on his face, "Oh, yes, Harry, about that. . . .
Ow!" Remus interrupted Sirius by elbowing him.

"Your secret is safe with us, Harry," Remus said, glaring at Sirius.

"Oh, right. Congratulations again, Harry. And we better get back to the party."

"Uh, Harry?"

"Yes, Remus?"

"Your hair and eyes are the wrong color."

"Oh, no! Not again!"

"What?"

"I think this is going to happen every time I transform!"

"We'll put a glamour on you for today."

"Thanks. Those Eye-Dye drops sting."

"You may want to slowly get rid of the disguise. We'll help you with that."

"Thanks. I think I better do that."

"By the way, you guys," Harry said after they magically changed his appearance so he looked like he usually did, "I don't think those boots quite go with the rest of your ensemble. I've never seen boots quite that color, either. What are they, Welsh Green Dragon hide?"

Remus smiled and answered, "No. Voldemort's big, venomous snake hide. We still have enough left over to make you a set after you stop growing."

"That would be great. But I am not wearing them for my wedding."

"Spoil sport," Sirius groused.

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That summer the Lovegoods didn't go on any big vacation, just a number of small ones throughout England, Scotland, and Wales. They visited many muggle and wizarding tourist spots as they went on day, overnight, and weekend trips.

They were in the Surry Zoo one day, enjoying the sun, relaxing away from their jobs -- Harry worked half time at Ollivander's Wand shop, while Luna had a part time job at a nick-knack store in Diagon Alley. They made their way around through the zoo, until they came to the reptile house.

Luna said, "Why don't you go in and visit with the snakes. I need to use the little Witch's room." The rest of her family went into the exhibit, while Luna walked away. Once out of sight, she changed course and came to the Big Cat building. She went inside and stood outside the cage of the black jaguar with the name plate Warriorette.

"Hi, Trixie! It's me, Luna. I thought you'd like to know: Neville's parents are all better; Voldemort is really dead; and I'm going to marry James Potter's son once we're done with school."

The Jaguar gave a snarly growl.

"I hope you're happy, too. I'll be back someday, especially once I have children. It's been good talking to you. Bye bye!" She hurried out of the building, and went to find her future husband.

As she had gotten older, and realized all that marriage involved, she came to think of Harry as her "future husband" as they weren't going to be performing all the activities of their marriage until they held the ceremony after Hogwarts. She knew that their vow bound them, but there was more to marriage than magic.

And until that day, she would work at becoming the wife that he deserved, and that she should be, just as she knew he attempted to

do the same thing for her, but only less successfully. He was, after all, only a boy.

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That evening Harry and Luna sat on some chairs in the garden at the Meadow. The moon was out, but didn't illuminate much. They could see the start of the woods surrounding them, and hear the gurgle of the stream, but details, except for the stars, were hidden in the darkness.

"You're very quiet, Harry. Is something bothering you?"

"No. I'm just tired. When do you think Remus and Tonks will marry?"

"Probably next summer. Why?"

"He'll want to tell her my secret soon after they get engaged."

"It's not so important any more."

"No, but I think I like being Harry Lovegood. I think being Harry Potter would only get in the way of, well everything."

Luna nodded. "Even after we're married?"

Harry nodded, "Yes. I had thought about announcing it then, but really, why bother. I am who I am, and using that other name would just make people think I'm someone else."

"Do you remember when you first came, and we hadn't decided on your name yet?"

Harry laughed and nodded.

"Who would have thought it would take seven years to decide."

Harry added, "And who would have thought there would be a Dark Lord trying to mess us up."

"He didn't stand a chance against us."

Harry laughed.

"What?"

Harry smiled at her. "Remember when we were wondering about the power he knew not?"

"Yes. You know what it is? Your animagus form? What then?"

"Cooperation. He just ordered people around, he didn't work with them. Makes you shudder to think what a Dark Lord who tried to get along with people could do."

"No, I don't want to think about it. Let's think of something nicer. Like how to put these chairs together so we can sit closer."

"Hmm, get up a moment," Harry also stood up. He concentrated, waved his wand and one of the lawn chairs was big enough for two. They both sat down on it.

Harry looked at Luna and said, "Have I told you today that I love you?"

Luna looked thoughtful, "Maybe, but that doesn't preclude you doing it again."

"I love you."

"And I love you."

They embraced, and kissed, and later looked at the stars. Harry held his bonded close and dreamed of the ceremony they would have in three years, and the lifetime afterwards.

The End

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Author Note: Thank you to all my betas! I couldn't do it without you.

Thank you, readers. You're reviews were encouraging and helpful.

To those who hoped that this story would be longer, I decided to end it here, as this was the end of the story. I had thought about making the meeting with Bellatrix in the zoo in an epilogue several years in the future, but I've got the beginning of an idea for another story with Luna and Harry Lovegood, and suddenly the future was different, and I still wanted Luna to meet with Trixie in the zoo, so it just became part of the summer. However, don't look for a sequel anytime soon. I have a number of other projects going, and don't need to start still another. I'll let it germinate in the back of my mind for a while.

On a different note, in the previous chapter Voldemort got the date for Wulpurgis wrong. He obviously misremembered and didn't bother to look it up. But I wasn't going to point out his mistake to him. I'm not that crazy. However, I'm sure he's sorry, now.

This chapter, like many of them, was beta-ed by Swordchucks, Evan Mayerle, and Wombat. I can't thank you guys enough!